

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

25c



MAR.

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KETCHUM



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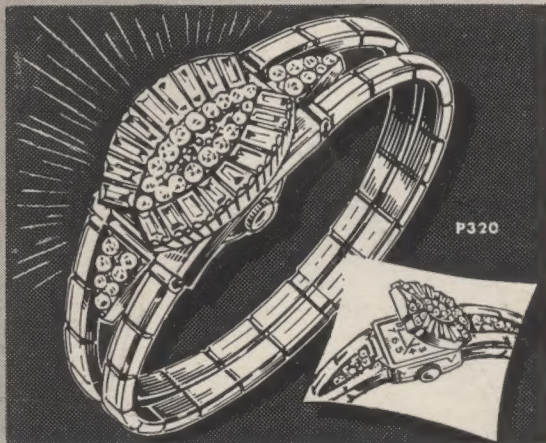
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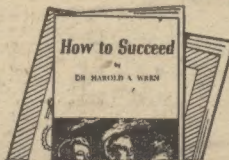
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25c

March 1953

VOL. 26

NO. 4

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Cannard faced a double challenge: the love of the girl he thought he'd lost, and the gun of a renegade returned from the dead!
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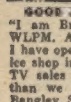
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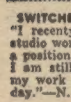
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CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 8)

HOWDY, ranahan! Here's your chance to prove you really know your stuff. Below are listed twenty Western brain-twisters. Try your hand at answering them. Call the turn on eighteen or more and you rank excellent. Answer sixteen or seventeen and you're good. But answer fewer than fourteen and you need brushing up on your Western lore. Good luck!

1. True or false? A "brand book" is a book devoted exclusively to a listing of cattle brands which have been altered by rustlers.

2. True or false? A "bronc squeezer" is a bronc buster.

3. True or false? Typically, a "brush roper" uses a very long rope with a large loop.

4. If the ranch boss asked you to get his "can openers," which of the following items would you think he wanted? His chaps? His spurs? His sixguns?

5. True or false? The Spanish word, "cocinero," means "cook."

6. True or false? Coyotes are known generally for the vicious way they attack human beings.

7. "Dice house" is a cowpuncher's slang expression for what well-known Western dwelling?

8. If a cowpuncher referred to a woman as "dulce," would you think he was insulting?

9. If a cowpoke friend of yours told you he had recently been "gouged," which of the following things would you think had happened to him? He had been swindled? He had been bucked off a horse? He had been thrown out of a saloon?

10. What is the meaning of the cowpoke's slang expression, "Hobble your lip?"

11. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "to hunt leather?"

12. A "leather pounder" is which of the following? A bull whip? A cowpuncher? An old fashioned buggy?

13. What is the meaning of the Spanish word "mujer" which is frequently heard in Southwestern United States?

14. True or false? "Potros" is a term which old-time Westerners used in reference to very old horses.

15. True or false? If a cowpoke told you he was "riding the ditch," he would mean he was occupied in looking after an irrigation system.

16. True or false? "Riding the shows" means riding in rodeos for prize money.

17. True or false? Wild cattle of the Nueces River Country were noted for the fact that they almost never ran.

18. True or false? "Shooting his back" is a term sometimes used in reference to a bucking horse.

19. True or false? "Snapping broncs" is a term used in reference to breaking wild horses.

20. True or false? If a cowpoke told you he was "stampeding to the wild bunch," he would mean he was joining an outlaw band.



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Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 6)



1. False. A brand book is a book in which brands are recorded.

2. True. A bronc squeezer is a bronc buster. The Western term, bronc buster, has a good many equivalents.

3. False. Typically, a brush roper uses a small loop and a short rope.

4. If the ranch boss asked you to get his "can openers," he would mean that he wanted his spurs.

5. True. The Spanish word *cocinero* means "cook."

6. False. Coyotes will seldom attack a human being unless rabid.

7. "Dice house" is a cowpuncher's slang expression for bunkhouse.

8. No. If a cowpuncher referred to a woman as "*dulce*," chances are he would not be attempting to be insulting. *Dulce* is the Spanish word for "sweet."

9. If a cowpoke told you had been "gouged," he would mean he had been swindled.

10. The term "Hobble your lip," means "Shut up!"

11. "To hunt leather" means to reach for the saddle horn. Thus, a cowpoke "hunts

leather" when necessary while riding a bucking horse.

12. "Leather pounder" is a cowpoke's slang expression for "cowpuncher." This term has many equivalents on the rangeland.

13. The Spanish word "*mujer*" means woman or girl.

14. False. "Potros" is a term which was used for young horses up to the time they change their milk teeth.

15. True. If a cowpoke told you he was "riding the ditch," he would mean he was occupied in taking care of an irrigation system.

16. True. The expression "riding the shows" is used in reference to the cowpoke who rides in a series of rodeos for the purpose of earning prize money.

17. False. Wild cattle of the *Nueces* River country were noted for their speed in running.

18. True. "Shooting his back" is a term used in reference to a bucking horse.

19. True. "Snapping broncs" is a term used in reference to breaking bucking horses.

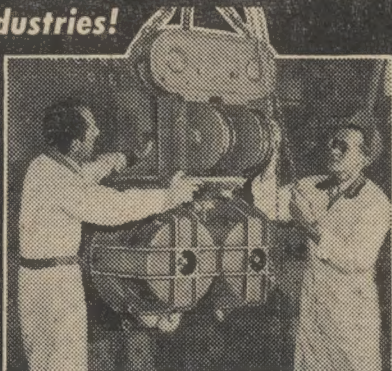
20. True. If a cowpoke told you he was "stampeding to the wild bunch," he would mean he was joining an outlaw band.

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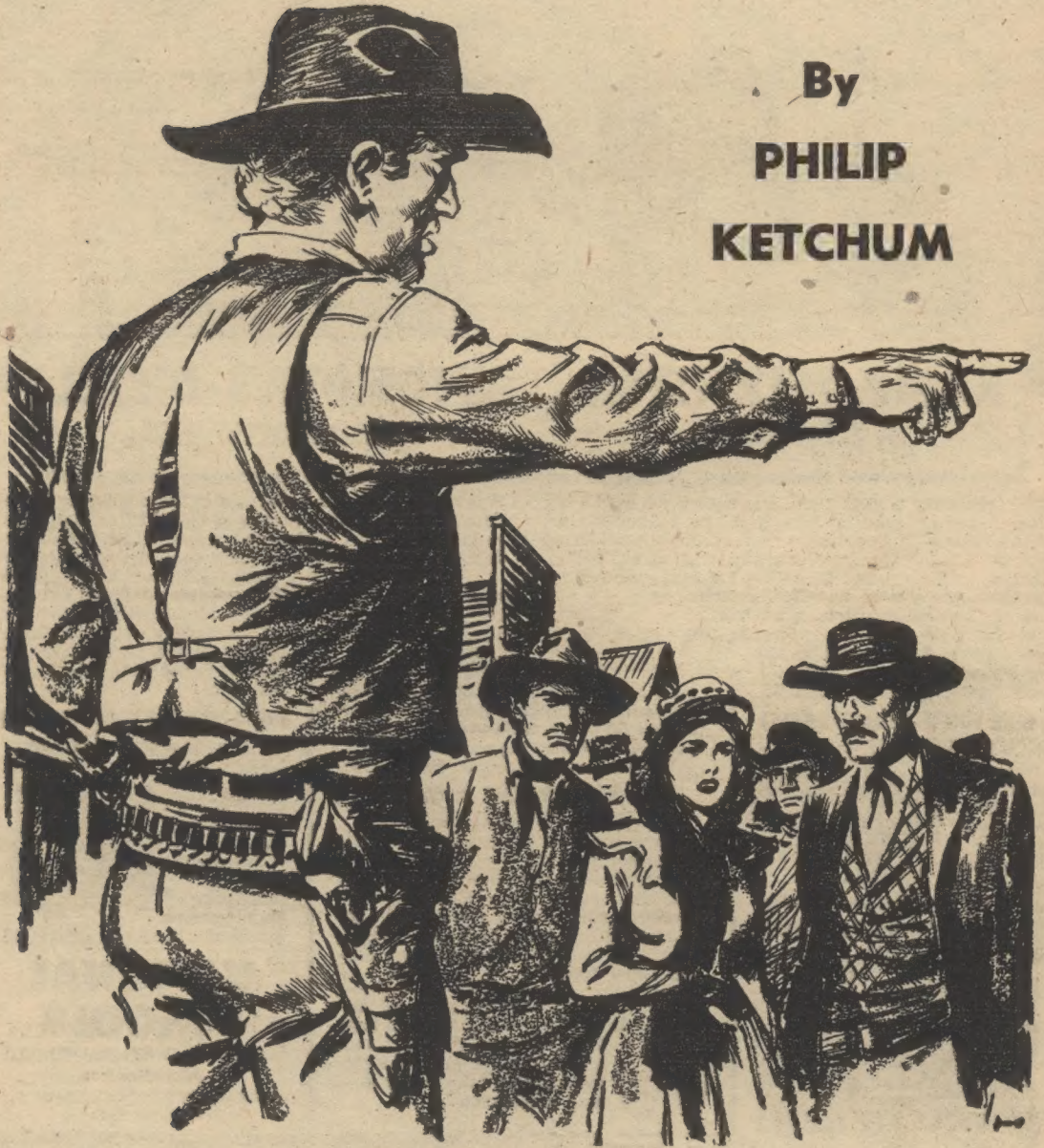
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**PHILIP
KETCHUM**



Trail-hardened Jeff Cannard rode back to the wilderness to face a deadly double challenge: The love of the girl he thought he'd lost—and the flaming gun of a renegade returned from the Range of the Dead!

OUTCAST



"There he stands," Weatherby declared. "I demand his arrest!"

CHAPTER ONE

Moonlight Rendezvous

THE trip east had taken him longer than he had expected and Jeff Canard was anxious to get back to Westport as quickly as possible. But he was tired

tonight, he had ridden a long way and the glow of the campfire at the side of the road beckoned invitingly.

Jeff pulled up as he neared it. In the circle of light made by the fire, he could distinguish the figures of two men and two women. He caught the impression that they

were young, and because of the two covered wagons near by he guessed that here were two more families heading for Westport, there to join some company bound for Oregon.

While Jeff hesitated, one of the women got to her feet and approached the fire. She lifted a coffee pot from the embers and turned back toward where the others were sitting. It was the sight of that coffee pot which decided Jeff Cannard. He rode a little nearer to the fire and called out, "Hello, there! Mind if I join you and borrow some of the heat of your fire?"

The two men jerked to their feet at the sound of his voice and Jeff Cannard urged his horse still closer so that they could see him more clearly. He was a tall, thin, young man, dressed in buckskin. Over his shoulder was slung a rifle and fastened to his belt was a long, sheathed knife. His skin was almost as bronzed as an Indian's.

"My name's Cannard," he announced, dismounting. "Jeff Cannard. And I'm on my way to Westport. I really ought to keep traveling, but your fire looked so inviting that I couldn't pass it up. I hope you don't mind."

One of the two men had grasped a rifle as he stood and had half lifted it to his shoulder, but he now lowered it and managed a grin.

"Nope, we don't mind at all," he nodded. "I'm Bill Logan and this is my wife, Mary." He indicated one of the women. "Over there is Hugh and Louise Stackpole. We're headed for Westport, too."

Logan was short and heavy with a round, youthful face and clear, blue eyes. He looked like he would have been much more at home on the streets of some city than driving a span of mules on the long trek to Oregon. His wife was rather thin and not particularly attractive. Stackpole was a taller man and perhaps a little older. Louise Stackpole, dark and slender, at first glance seemed to Jeff to be one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen.

"How would a cup of coffee go?" asked Bill Logan.

Jeff grunted. "I hoped you would suggest something like that. My throat's sure mighty dry."

Mary Logan hurried to one of the wagons and came back with a cup and the coffee was poured. Jeff tied his horse and joined the others and of course there was only one thing to talk about—the long trail to Oregon. Jeff admitted that he had been over it twice and then answered innumerable questions.

He was glad that he had stopped. The hot coffee, the warmth of the fire and the friendliness of these four young people made an hour slip by swiftly. None of them, he could see, had any conception of the long, hard way which lay ahead. Yet, in their eagerness and enthusiasm, he could detect a spirit which he knew would stand the test of the trail.

"Don't know what company we'll join up with when we get to Westport," Bill Logan mentioned. "Maybe you can help us out."

Jeff nodded. "I came back from Oregon with Sam Shem, a scout. He's probably waiting for me in Westport. At least he said he would wait. You see Sam Shem when you get to Westport. He'll know every company that's organized and Sam Shem's a man you can trust. He's the best scout that ever led a company west and he knows men."

"We'll remember that," Logan promised.

Jeff got to his feet. He had twenty miles still to cover and though he would have liked to have stayed here longer, he had a feeling that he had better be moving on.

"Why not spend the night here," said Hugh Stackpole. "We've got a tent and extra blankets."

Jeff shook his head. He crossed over and mounted his horse, waved a farewell, and rode on toward Westport. The night was clear and cold with the sharpness of early spring, but the pause had rested him, and the talk of Oregon had made him even more anxious to join Sam Shem and learn what arrangements Shem had made for them.

Once, as he was riding, it seemed to Jeff Cannard that the faint breeze carried with it the sound of distant gunfire, but when he paused and listened all that he could hear was the plaintive howling of coyotes.

SAM SHEM was a little, stooped man with a deeply wrinkled face and sharp, blue eyes as vivid as a clear morning sky. He had been born Samuel Shemmerhorn, but few men knew him by any other name than Sam Shem. For years he had been a fur trader but two summers before he had hired out as a scout for a wagon train headed for Oregon and that work was more to his liking. Though he wouldn't admit it, he loved being with people almost as much as he liked the great plains and the rugged mountains, and as a scout, he could have both.

He wasn't much to look at. His buckskin clothing was old and worn and the slouch with which he walked made him seem ready for the grave. But no man could move more silently through the night than Sam Shem, none could smell out trouble any quicker or plan a surer way of meeting it. No man could match him with a rifle or knife.

Sam Shem seemed really pleased to see Jeff the next morning. An infrequent smile crossed his face and he put out his hand and said, "Hi, Jeff. I was beginnin' to get a little worried about you. Did you get everything fixed up back home?"

Jeff Cannard shook his head. "Not everything. That is, the man I was most anxious to see had left."

"And the gal?"

Jeff frowned. "She was gone, too."

Sam Shem grunted. "Maybe it's just as well, son. You're too good a scout to get tied up with any woman. Come on down to my tent. I wanna talk to you."

They had met on the main street of Westport and it was quite early, but already the town was waking up to another day's business. A good many men were on the street and others were drifting in from the camps around the town and down near the river.

Several hundred wagons already surrounded the place, most of them already lashed with logs for the fording. Herds of cattle, oxen and mules were being tended on the meadows back of the town.

"How soon do we leave, Sam?" Jeff asked.

"First two companies have already crossed over," Sam Shem replied. "We're about ready to go, too."

"A good company?"

"Yep. Fifty wagons an' a herd of seventy-five cattle."

Jeff whistled. That was indeed quite a company. "Where are they from?" he demanded.

"Most anywhere."

"And the captain?"

"I'll tell you about him later. Want you to meet him. He's a rather particular cuss."

They had reached Shem's tent, now, and the old scout set about preparing breakfast. Jeff watched him. He didn't offer to help. One of Sam's peculiarities was that he prepared his own meals. He wouldn't tolerate any interference. And he wouldn't talk when he didn't want to and, right now, Jeff discovered, Shem didn't want to talk about the company they were piloting across the plains and mountains.

Once breakfast was out of the way, Sam lit a stubby pipe and leaned back against a log near his tent.

"Things like this," he said slowly, waving his hands toward the wagons all about, "draw all kinds of people; the bad as well as the good, the kind of people who like to live off of others, as well as the kind who work for what they want."

Jeff Cannard nodded his head. "I reckon you're right, Sam."

"It costs a lot to provision for a trip to Oregon, but a good many of the men here have still got a lot of money. An' there's some folks here with money, but no wagons or provisions."

Again Jeff nodded. He wondered what Shem was driving at.

"Just suppose," said Sam, "that you was

sort of crooked yourself, Jeff. Suppose you wanted a lot of money quick an' you didn't care how you got it. Don't you think that this might be a good place to come?"

"It might."

Shem drew in on his pipe. He took it out of his mouth and scowled at it.

"Jeff," he said suddenly, "that first company that left here didn't get very far. A couple nights west of the river they was attacked by Sioux Injuns. It wasn't a big company. I reckon they didn't have a chance."

A sudden, cold chill crept over Jeff's body. "Sioux Injuns!" he gasped. "That close!"

Shem shook his head. "That was the story. I rode out there an' looked the place over. I don't think it was Injuns that looted that wagon train in spite of what the folks that got away had to say."

"But you said—"

"I said what all the rest of the people around here are sayin'. It seems to me that the folks what got away, got away too easy. There was several other things that looked funny, too. For instance, the attack was at night, an' the Sioux never attacks at night. Then, in spite of all the fightin' there wasn't any dead Injuns to be found. Maybe they was carried away, but Sioux would have left their dead."

JEFF CANNARD nodded. He knew Sam too well to question him. If the scout said that Indians hadn't attacked the wagon train he would have bet his last dollar that he was right.

"What I want to know is this," Shem went on after a brief pause. "We're supposed to get these wagon trains to Oregon. If we met hostile Injuns on the way, we'd fight 'em. Wouldn't it be just as right to fight a band of white men who tried to stop us?"

"It would be even more right."

"In fact, anything we did to get a bunch like that would be justified, wouldn't it."

Jeff's lips tightened. He nodded his head.

Shem stood up. "I gotta plan," he said. "I'll tell you about it later. You stay right here, Jeff, until I get back."

Sam was gone for a long time. For a while, Jeff considered what the old scout had told him and wondered what plan he had in mind. Then, as the morning sun rose higher in the sky and as it began to grow warm, he rolled out his blankets and dozed, thinking vaguely of the trip east, from which he had just returned and of what it had accomplished and what it had left undone.

Shem returned just after noon, and he seemed rather preoccupied. "Suppose we amble back into town," he suggested. "There's a man there I want you to meet."

Jeff nodded and stood up. He felt a little groggy from his nap and his muscles were stiff and sore.

"Who's this man?" he demanded.

Sam didn't seem to hear the question. He had turned and started toward the town and there was nothing for Jeff to do but follow him.

Westport, in this year of 1845, was still little more than a village with a few crooked, rutted streets and flimsy frame buildings. Yet during this season of the year, it was a place of bustling activity. Here was the last stopping place before the long trail west. Here, companies from Independence, and from other points farther east, made their final check-ups. In the spring the streets were always thronged with people and supply houses and outfitters; and dealers in mules, cattle, horses, and oxen did a rushing business.

Jeff Cannard, as he followed Shem up the street, eyed the throngs of people with considerable interest. These were the people about to set out on the long trail across the plains and mountains, and they were of all kinds. Some of the women were dressed in the latest fashions and others wore drab, homespun clothing. There were men in Prince Alberts and stove-pipe hats, and other men dressed more the way he and Sam did. From every walk of life, people had gath-

ered here, and though social distinctions were still maintained in Westport and would be attempted as the long journey started, the trials which lay ahead would level things out or, rather, create a new aristocracy—one of courage and endurance.

Midway up the street, Jeff Cannard came to an abrupt stop. Several paces ahead and looking straight at him, was a tall, slender, fair-haired girl. There was a startled expression on her face and even as he caught sight of her, the girl lifted one hand to her throat as though to hold back a gasp of surprise.

"Hilda," Jeff breathed. "Hilda Weatherby!"

He knew that he couldn't be right, that this couldn't be Hilda Weatherby that he was facing—and yet it was. Her features were too clearly impressed on his mind to be forgotten.

Unaware of Shem or of any others on the street, Jeff moved forward until he stood just in front of the girl. He said, "Hilda, it's really you," and all of the astonishment that he felt sounded in his voice.

"Yes, it's really me, Jeff," she answered.

HER voice was deeper than Jeff recalled, but in no other way did she seem to have changed. Perhaps there was a more assured look in her eyes and a deeper fullness to her lips, but she looked just as Jeff had remembered her over a hundred campfires during the past three years.

"I have just come from Clarendon," Jeff went on. "You had gone from there. I wanted to see you. I had never thought—"

"Hey, Jeff," broke in the voice of Shem, "Here's the man I wanted you to meet, the captain of the wagon company we're guidin' to Oregon. His name's Matt Weatherby."

Jeff Cannard swung around to stare at the tall, heavy-set man who stood at the scout's side. Matt Weatherby, Hilda's father, hadn't changed either. His pale face was just as stern as it had been the last time Jeff had seen it, and his eyes were as sharp and as hard.

"Jeff Cannard!" said Weatherby.

There was no sound of pleasure in Weatherby's tone and his voice was so loud that people standing near-by turned to look at him.

Jeff knew what was coming next. He could read it in the tightening expression on Weatherby's face.

"Yes, Mr. Weatherby," he admitted. "I'm Jeff Cannard."

Weatherby turned to the scout. "This is the man you picked to go with us to Oregon!" he cried. "Do you know what he is? Do you know that he is a thief and a murderer—a cold blooded killer!"

Hilda stepped over and caught her father's arm. Her cheeks were very pale. She said, "No, father. No. I—"

But Weatherby wasn't to be denied. His voice and his accusation had already attracted the attention of every one near him and now lifting his arm he pointed at Jeff Cannard.

"There he stands," he declared. "A thief and a murderer. He robbed the bank of Clarendon of a thousand dollars and killed the night marshal in his escape. If there is any law in this town, if there is any justice—I demand his arrest."

Shem had backed away. Though Jeff had told him the whole story, the scout had moved to the fringe of the crowd and was scowling. Others had closed in around Jeff and Weatherby.

"I reckon we've got a law here," someone spoke up. "An' if we haven't, maybe we can dish out a little justice, anyhow. What do the rest of you think?"

There were murmurs of approval from the crowd and now, from one side there was a sudden interruption as a woman pushed forward and then suddenly cried, "There he is! He's the man I was talking about!"

Jeff swung around and looked at the woman. At first he didn't recognize her for her eyes were swollen with tears and she was deadly pale. Then he saw that the woman was Mary Logan.

"He came to our camp last night," Mary Logan went on. "He stopped by and acted friendly, just to look it over. Then when he was sure there were only four of us, he left and got his other men. They came back and tried to take our wagons. My husband was killed, and Louise Stockpole."

Sobs choked the woman's voice. She took a step forward Jeff, then stopped, swayed, and would have fallen if someone hadn't caught her.

Angry murmurs rose from the throats of the men who had gathered around Jeff Cannard. They surged forward. Someone grabbed Jeff's gun and another man shouted for a rope. Jeff tried to explain that he didn't know what the woman had been talking about but no one would listen to him. Her accusation coming on the heels of Weatherby's, was completely damning.

A fist smashed into Jeff's face and instinctively he tried to protect himself. The show of a struggle was enough to fire the crowd. Hands clawed at Jeff's arms, more fists hammered at his head and ribs. The rain of blows stunned him and though he hit back desperately he had no chance at all. He went down, was pulled erect and then went down again. A thousand stars danced before his eyes and then blinked out as all consciousness left him.

CHAPTER TWO

Helped to Escape

THE ROPES binding his wrists were so tight that they cut into his flesh and he was staked out on the ground so securely that he couldn't move. He was in a tent, somewhere, and there were guards around it for he could hear them exchanging remarks. It was night and it was cold, and every inch of him ached from the beating he had taken.

When he had first recovered consciousness, his thoughts had been so confused that he couldn't understand where he was or

what had happened. But gradually the whole picture had become clear, or at least most of it. He remembered the gunfire he had thought he heard when riding away from the camp where he had stopped for coffee the night before. That must have been the attack Mary Logan had been speaking of, and perhaps it was natural for her to include him as one of the raiders, one who had come to look the place over before playing his hand.

Her accusation, alone, might have been serious, but after what Weatherby had said, Mary Logan's voice had been the final straw. It had landed him in something from which there was no escape. Justice, here on the border, was a swift and sure thing. He was a little surprised that he was still alive.

"Has he woke up yet?" asked a heavy voice outside the tent.

"Naw. Not yet," someone replied. "I don't get the idea, anyhow, of waitin' for him to wake up. Why not finish it?"

The first man laughed grimly. "We'll finish it soon enough. It just happens to be Weatherby's notion that the man ought to have a chance to make a final statement before he's strung up. Let's look at him."

The tent flap was opened and lantern light spilled over Jeff's face. He closed his eyes and lay rigid.

"Keep lookin' in occasionally," said the voice of the first man. "Let us know soon as he wakes up. It ain't too late to get this over with today."

They backed away and Jeff opened his eyes again and tugged at his bonds. It was no use. He couldn't move. Whoever had tied him up had done a thorough job.

For what seemed a long time, Jeff Cannard stared up at the darkness. He thought of Matt Weatherby, whose peculiar sense of the right way to do things was probably responsible for the fact that he still lived. And of Hilda Weatherby, who hadn't cringed away from him when he saw her but who had looked him squarely in the eyes just as though there had been no cloud over his name. He wondered what had brought the

Weatherbys west and what had happened to his brother, Fred Cannard, and Sibyl, Fred's wife.

He thought of Sam Shem, his years out here on the border, of the trail across the plains and mountains, and of the green forests and blue rivers of Oregon. And then suddenly he became aware of a faint, scratching sound on the wall of the tent and a sharp thrill ran over him. He knew the sound meant that Sam Shem was out there. He had come to get him out of this.

A slight cut had been made in the wall, and under the tent came a shadowy figure. A knife licked out and cut Jeff's bonds at his wrists and ankles. Then a voice whispered, "Follow me. If we get split up, meet tomorrow night at Latham's Grove."

Jeff rolled over and got to his knees. There was a great thumping in his head and he was so dizzy that he had to close his eyes. When he opened them, Sam Shem's legs were wriggling under the tent.

For a moment, Jeff Cannard waited, rubbing his wrists and flexing the muscles of his legs and giving Sam a chance to get away. Alone, Jeff knew that the scout could make it. With a hundred men around this place, Jeff still would have bet that Shem could have approached and left undetected. But Jeff was afraid that if he followed too closely they might be discovered. He had learned a great deal from Sam Shem, but he still couldn't rival the old scout in anything like this.

Outside the front of the tent a voice said suddenly, "Suppose we look in on that guy again. Maybe he's awake."

"Or maybe we can wake him up," came an answer.

Even as those two men spoke, Jeff could hear them start forward. There was no time to slip under the tent and wriggle away. And he couldn't fake being tied up or unconscious again. He was caught.

A hand caught at the tent flap and pulled it wide, and lamplight spilled through the opening. Jeff came to his feet. His eyes

searched the tent for some weapon, but there was nothing handy. He stepped to the side wall and edged forward.

A man, ducking over, moved into the tent, and at the sight of the cut ropes on the ground, a cry of alarm rose to his lips. Jeff stepped closer to him and the man caught sight of him just as Jeff's fist smashed out. His second cry was half smothered by the blow and the lantern dropped from the man's hand as he staggered sideways.

"Hey, Ed!" called a voice from the outside. "What's wrong!"

JEFF stooped over and lunged through the tent's opening. His shoulder crashed into a figure just outside and bowled the man over. A startled scream cracked from his lips and from the darkness on every side, or so it seemed to Jeff, men started closing in. He caught sight of several lanterns and could hear the thud of racing feet. Just ahead of him were several men. They were coming forward swiftly. Light glistened on their rifle barrels.

Jeff straightened up. "He's got away," he shouted. "He's headed for the river. This way."

Even as he was speaking, Jeff Cannard jerked around and headed for the river. All about him were other tents and here and there were wagons, huge and ghostly in the pale light of the stars. Men were tumbling out of the tents, shouting to one another.

"This way!" Jeff shouted again. "He's headed for the river."

He ducked between two of the wagons, threw himself to the ground and rolled back under one of them. Behind him, others had taken up his cry. Footsteps passed by on either side of him and the volume of the shouting increased as more and more men were drawn into the search.

For several minutes Jeff lay where he was. He knew that he wouldn't be safe here very long. By now, the first of the men would have reached the river and probably would have turned back. Doubtless a complete

search of the town and all this surrounding area would soon be under way. There was no security for him in Westport tonight. He had to get away.

Jeff rolled out from under the wagon and stood up. He was north and west of the village, in one of the camps which surrounded it. Near the glowing embers of a fire, a little distance away, he could make out several women and a couple of men. The men were carrying rifles. To the north, a little distance, were other wagons. Jeff headed that way, not hurrying and not trying to hide any more. Fortunately, he was sure, not many of the people around here could know him by sight, in spite of that scene in town. And fortunately, a good many other scouts were here and were dressed much the same as he was dressed.

Jeff reached the next half-circle of wagons and passed between two of them. Beyond, he could make out several staked horses. He started that way, then stopped. Several men were crouched close to the ground near those horses, perhaps anticipating that he might try to steal one of them.

"Jeff!" The voice came from the shadows behind him, and was quite low, hardly above a husky whisper. "Jeff Cannard!"

Jeff whirled around. He caught the glimpse of a woman's figure, of the white blur of a face, of a hand extended toward him.

"Hilda," he answered.

The girl hurried forward and she said no word of what had happened in town that day or of the charges against him. "They're waiting for you near those horses," she whispered. "I'll hide you in one of our wagons."

Jeff shook his head. "They'll search every wagon." And then, "I didn't do that thing I was accused of, any more than I killed that marshal back in Clarendon, or robbed the bank."

"I know that, Jeff," she answered. "Did you think I didn't?"

Jeff wanted to reach out and crush her in his arms. He had the sudden feeling that

none of the charges against him were important any longer.

"Your brother is here with us, Jeff," Hilda said suddenly. "He's changed. I think you ought to see him."

"Fred's here? And his wife?"

Hilda nodded. . . .

Men were beginning to drift back from the river and some of them would pass quite close to where he and Hilda were standing.

"Search all the wagons," someone was shouting. "He didn't get away across the river. Maybe he's hidin' someplace."

Hilda grasped Jeff's arm. "What will you do, Jeff?" she whispered.

Jeff Cannard managed a grin. "Hilda," he asked. "Can you scream?"

"Scream?"

"That's it. Scream as though someone were killing you?"

"Yes, but—"

"That's all," said Jeff swiftly. "Count to ten and then scream. Scream as loud as you can."

He turned abruptly away and started toward the river but kept carefully in the shadow of the wagons. Then, as a shrill, startled scream sounded from behind him, he stopped and glanced over toward where the horses were tethered. Again that scream split the silence of the night, and yet again.

Men passed Jeff, racing up from the river and those who had been guarding the horses came to their feet and hurried toward the sound of the screams.

Jeff waited for only a moment longer, then he streaked for the horses. He was seen as he reached them and pulled one of them free. A warning cry arose from behind him, and a rifle bullet sang an angry message above his head.

It took but an instant for Jeff to catch a hand in the horse's mane and swing astride it. Then, as his knees gripped the horse and as it lunged away, more shots burned through the air, several of them uncomfortably close.

Jeff threw back a thin, taunting laugh, then leaning forward, he hugged the back of

the horse until he was safely away from the widespread camp. After a while he sat up and let the horse drop back to a trot. He didn't think that he had to worry about any pursuit. But there were plenty of other things to worry him.

IT WAS an hour after dusk, the next evening, when Shem reached that point along the river known as Latham's Grove, and Jeff was waiting for him. Jeff had done a good deal of thinking during the past day and he had a salvo of questions ready to throw at the scout.

But as though anticipating something like that, Sam tossed a bundle of food to Jeff, and said, "Start eatin', an' let me do the talkin' for a while."

Jeff scowled. "It had better be straight talk, Sam."

"Sure," nodded the scout. "It will be."

He got out his pipe, lit it, and settled himself comfortably on the ground with his back against a tree.

"I reckon I had figgered out what would happen when Matt Weatherby saw you," the scout admitted. "I counted on that. But I've got to admit that what that woman added almost spoiled things."

Jeff stared at the scout. "You planned to have me publicly accused of murder by Matt Weatherby?"

"I reckoned that was what might happen. You see, you told me once all about that trouble in Clarendon, an' when I ran onto a bunch of families from Clarendon, an' especially your brother, an' after I got to know Matt Weatherby, it wasn't hard to figger out what he would do when he saw you."

"But why, Sam?"

"Remember what I told you about that wagon train which ran into trouble? Well, I figger white men were the Injuns which raided it. An' I sort of figgered that if you was given a black enough name an' was to start ridin' around, lookin' for revenge, you might be given a chance to tie in with them renegades."

Jeff sucked in a long breath. "So that's it, huh?"

"Yep, that's it," Shem admitted. "I rode out today to where those two wagons were raided the other night. I figger the same bunch that tried to pull that raid, pulled the raid on the wagon train I told you about. In other words, as I see it, there's a band of cold blooded, murderin' white men operatin' around these parts, an' until they're cleaned out, there ain't no one gonna be safe."

"So in order to get on the trail of those men, you go and ruin my reputation in the only place where I'm still safe."

SHEM grinned. "It ain't that bad, son. Your brother's all ready to admit that he took that money that was stolen from the bank in Clarendon an' he can prove that he killed the marshal when they got to arguin' about how to split it. You've paid the money back. Your brother ain't out here to run away. He's out here to find you an' take you back to Clarendon. I reckon things can be cleared up all right, when the time comes. All except that Mary Logan's accusation, an' I hadn't counted on that."

Jeff had been sitting down but now he got to his feet. "Fred was just a kid when he got mixed up in that bank deal," he said slowly. "Even though he was married, he was just a kid. I don't want him to admit anything. I won't have it."

"You can't help it, son. You can't expect a man to go through life carryin' on his shoulders the burden of havin' another suffer for what he's done. It ain't right. He's growed up, Jeff and he's got to carry his own load."

Jeff wiped a hand over his face. "I'd like to see him."

"You'll get a chance to. Only this other thing comes first."

For several minutes, Cannard was silent. He was made glad, but he was also disturbed at what Sam had said about his brother and it took him some time to put that personal angle out of his mind. After a while, however, he was able to look at the other problem con-

fronting them. And as he did he could see how cleverly Shem had put him into a position to get into contact with the men the scout was after.

In the guise of a man embittered by the charges made against him and anxious for revenge, he might be a very possible recruit for the band of renegades. It was a dangerous course he must follow, but Shem was right in feeling that such a band, if it existed, had to be smashed.

"I brought some store clothes with me," Sam mentioned. "Don't many folks know you. I think maybe, if you're careful, you might slip back into Westport an' hang around the drinkin' places. Or maybe if you just camped out for a while—"

"Have you any lead at all, Sam?"

"Do you remember Lem Potter?"

"Potter!" Jeff gasped. "But Potter's dead."

Sam Shem shook his head. "He's very much alive. I saw him in Westport a couple days ago. He's heavier now than he was a couple of years ago, better dressed. He's got more money. Of course he may not be in on it at all, but if there's anything goin' on like I think, Potter knows all about it."

Jeff Cannard could agree in that. Two years before, Lem Potter had been well known around here. He had fronted as a gambler but, on the side had dealt in stolen supplies, and even stolen wagons and oxen. After several particularly cold-blooded murders, Potter had been exposed and had fled from town. He had been shot from his horse while fording the river. But if he hadn't been killed: . . .

"This whole thing follows the pattern of what happened a couple of years ago," Shem mentioned. "That, an' seein' Potter, is one of the things that got me started thinkin'. Anyhow, you go at it just as you wish. If you get a line on the band, get me word, somehow. I'll raise five hundred men to back you in less than fifteen minutes."

Jeff Cannard nodded and after a moment a grin came to his face. He said, "Good

enough, Sam. Where are those store clothes?"

CHAPTER THREE

A Mysterious Rescue

THE TRAIL Saloon was in a frame building, so rickety that a strong wind might have blown it over. The floor was of hard-packed dirt, which, during the rainy season, was covered with straw. At one side was a long bar and opposite it were gambling tables. A dozen lamps hung from the building's rafters.

There was always a good crowd, though there were nicer places up the street. Here, liquor was cheap, and the gambling games were anything a man wanted to make them. Here, anything went, and on more than one occasion, the hard-packed earth had sopped up the blood of a man who hadn't been quick enough with his knife or gun.

Jeff Cannard passed through the doors of the saloon, late on the same night as his meeting with Shem. He felt uncomfortable in the clothing the old scout had brought; but by letting his shoulders sag and by shuffling his feet, he knew that he wouldn't be mistaken for the man who had been taken captive the afternoon before.

Lem Potter, he saw almost at once, but without Shem's tip he knew wouldn't have recognized him. The years had changed him. He was standing at the far end of the bar, looking the crowd over with cynical eyes, which, though they seemed only mildly interested in what was going on, probably missed very little.

Jeff edged that way. He knew the exact moment that Potter spotted him and guessed at once that the man knew who he was. Yet, with a casual indifference, he continued on to the back of the room and found a vacant place against the wall.

For several minutes, Potter stood where he was, then swinging around the man came up to him.

"Hello, Cannard," he said quietly. "Pretty

risky for you, isn't it, coming in here now?"

Jeff's eyes narrowed. "Maybe it's risky, too, for Lem Potter to be hangin' around Westport."

Potter smiled, but it was a thin smile and there was little humor in it.

"So you know me, huh?" he mentioned.

Jeff shrugged. "Just leave me alone, Potter. I've got business here in Westport."

"Maybe you want to square things up with someone."

"Maybe."

"I might be able to help you, Cannard?"

Jeff shook his head. "I'll not need any help."

For a moment Lem Potter studied him but Jeff maintained his air of indifference. This was proving too easy. He didn't like it.

Potter, however, only laughed, and after a moment, said, "All right, Cannard. Suit yourself. But if you change your mind, look me up."

Jeff didn't answer and after the man had moved away he stood where he was, scowling after him and wondering if his job was going to be as easy as it seemed. Then, as his eyes fell on a man who had just come into the room, Jeff stiffened. His lips moved, forming the name, Fred, but he didn't move from where he stood.

His brother, it seemed to him, was heavier than he had been three years before and his face seemed stronger. There seemed to be a purpose, now, in the set of his jaw and in the way he carried himself. And he didn't head straight for the bar as he would have three years ago upon entering any saloon. Instead, he started drifting through the room and kept glancing from side to side as though searching for someone.

Just as with Potter, Jeff knew the moment that Fred saw and recognized him, but Fred's approach was quite different. He didn't come over toward Jeff at once but drew near him gradually, and finally took a place at the wall, close by; and without even looking at Jeff, said under his breath, "Hi, fella. I had a notion that I might run into

you here. Thought I'd chance it anyway."

Jeff kept watching the crowd. From Fred's words and attitude, he was sure that his brother must have been in Shem's confidence.

"I went back to Clarendon this summer," he mentioned. "I paid back that money to the bank."

FRED bit his lips. "You shouldn't have, Jeff. You've done everything for me. It's my turn, now. I would have told the whole story in Clarendon but that wouldn't have brought you back. I wanted to find you, first."

"We'll talk it over in a day or two, Fred."

"Have you found Potter?"

A tall, wide-shouldered man had just come into the saloon and Jeff noticed his eyes circling the room and saw them rest for a moment on Fred and then move over to him. Recognition had showed in the man's eyes when he saw Fred but now, as he looked at Jeff, a rather puzzled expression showed on his face.

"There's Harry English," Fred said swiftly. "He was one of the men Weatherby set to guard you when he insisted on holding you prisoner. He may recognize you. I'll try to get him out of here. You had better drift."

As he finished speaking, Fred moved away from the back wall and headed toward English. Jeff scowled. He saw Fred and English meet, saw them talk for a minute, saw Fred look back at him and shake his head, and then he noticed Potter heading toward the two men.

A cold chill crept over his body. He had a notion that he knew what Potter was saying. It would be just like Potter to betray him. It would fit the man's warped sense of humor.

Lem Potter moved away after a moment and joined several other men at the bar, but English turned away, too. He dropped a word to several men seated at a table near-by and then crossed on to another table and then another. Fred stood where he was, apparently undecided what to do.

Jeff could get the whole picture. English

had recognized him and when Fred had denied his identity, Potter stepped forward to confirm the man's suspicions. Now, English was passing out word that Jeff Cannard was in the Trail Saloon. Most of the men here were from the companies waiting to cross the river and start for Oregon. They wouldn't have much patience with a man who stood accused, and in most of their minds, convicted of a raid on a wagon train.

English had reached the other side of the saloon, having passed his message on to about a score of men, and most of them were now getting to their feet. Potter, and those at the bar with him, had turned around and were looking at Jeff.

Jeff Cannard straightened. He looked at Fred and shook his head in a warning to the younger man to keep out. Then, as though still unaware of the situation, Jeff started drifting across the rear of the room, moving ever closer to the back door.

English had turned and with a triumphant look on his face, was coming forward. Every man in the saloon was watching him. One of those near Potter left and hurried toward the front door and the others spread throughout the room. All of those movements were clear to Jeff. He could see this whole thing unfolding just as though he were standing aside and witnessing it.

"Cannard!" English called. "Jeff Cannard! What brought you back to Westport?"

Jeff stopped and stared at the man. The shadow of fear lay deep in the fellow's eyes. He had little stomach for this. His words to the others had been to make sure of help. He planned only to point Jeff out to these men in the saloon and then to let them make sure of his capture.

"Aren't you mistaken?" asked Jeff bluntly.

English blinked, moistened his lips. He pointed a finger at Cannard. And from every side of the room, men started crowding closer.

"No, I'm not mistaken. You're Jeff Cannard."

Jeff stepped swiftly forward. His fist shot

out and smashed the man in the jaw, driving him backwards. Several other men closed in with angry shouts, but two of them were smashed down by a chair in the hands of his brother, who threw himself forward, screaming, "Get away, Jeff. I'll hold 'em."

There was a bright, almost feverish look in Fred's eyes. He swung the chair over his head and hurled it at another fellow who was rushing forward.

Jeff caught his brother by the shoulder and jerked him back toward the door. He kicked it open and lunged outside. Several shadowy figures were there, but they offered no resistance. Instead, a husky voice whispered, "Ride south, Cannard, along the river. There's a horse straight ahead."

Jeff didn't try to figure out that message or the reason why the men waiting near the door now blocked the way so that no one could follow them. He found the horse, swung into the saddle and pulled Fred up behind him. Back at the saloon door, the battle was still going on.

"Looks like you're in this with me, Fred," Jeff said, scowling. "Why didn't you keep out of it?"

There was a wide grin on the younger man's face. "I guess maybe I didn't want to. Let's ride, Jeff—south along the river."

CHAPTER FOUR

Jeff Joins the Renegades

THE CABIN was in a valley, ten miles south of Westport. It was set in a grove of trees, some little distance from the river and once, had undoubtedly been the headquarters of a trapper. Light showed through the crack around the door and through chinks in the logs, and inside, late that night, four men were talking.

"He'll be along this way, him an' his brother," said Lem Potter. "An' when they get here I want you to treat 'em right. Don't hold back anything at all. Make 'em think you're glad to have 'em join up with us."

The three men facing Potter were silent for a moment. They were all past middle age, were heavily bearded and dressed in rough clothing. There was a harshness in their features which they couldn't have hidden.

"I don't get it, Lem," said one of them. "You tell us that this Sam Shem has got a notion it wasn't Injuns that raided that wagon train. You said Shem saw you the other day, that maybe he's guessed we're workin' again. You tell us that this Jeff Cannard is his pal an' then you tell us he's comin' here to join us."

"That's right," Potter nodded. "He's been run out of Westport, charged with murder. He was even accused of bein' in on that raid you fellows messed up the other night."

"You know damned good an' well that he wasn't."

"Sure," Potter agreed. "An' I've got a notion the other charge against him is faked. I learned that Shem helped him escape from Westport. What I honestly think, is this—Shem has sent him to join up with us to find out who we are an' what we're plannin'. Cannard is comin' here as a spy."

The man who had been talking with Potter drew out a knife. "I'll look after him," he said flatly.

"No you won't, Brit," Potter snapped. "You'll do just as I said. We're callin' in the rest of the bunch. They'll be here directly. We'll head east, an' hit another camp, an' we'll drop Cannard there. When Cannard's body is found in a raided camp, most people in Westport will be sure he was in on that other raid, an' a few whispers in the right places may make the goin' a little tough for Sam Shem."

Outside the cabin, a silent figure which had been standing close to one of the chinks in the logs, moved stealthily away. Jeff Cannard had heard nearly all that Potter had to say. He hadn't headed directly south after his escape from the saloon, but had waited on the outskirts of the village until he had seen Potter leaving, and then with Fred ac-

companying him on a "borrowed" horse, they had followed the man. When he had turned into this valley and Jeff had seen the cabin, he had left the horses with Fred and approached the place on foot.

What he had heard didn't surprise him much. He hadn't thought it would be easy to become a member of Potter's band. He had been suspicious when Potter had first approached him. And even though Potter had betrayed him in the saloon and had seemingly tried to force him to join up, he had still felt that his acceptance was being made too easy.

Several hundred yards from the cabin, the man whom Potter had left on watch was still at his post, Jeff circled past him and hurried to the place where Fred was waiting, almost a quarter of a mile away.

"Well?" Fred asked eagerly.

"There's four of them there, Fred," Jeff said slowly. "Five, counting the man on guard, watchin' for us. An' the rest of the band is on its way. You know, I've a notion that Lem Potter knew we were following him. He's sure that we'll show up. Maybe he figures that we're layin' out somewhere, thinking things over.

Fred Cannard nodded. "You think they'll take us in. Do you figure—"

"I figure that you've got to head back and find Sam Shem."

"No, Jeff."

"They're planning a raid tonight and Shem's got to know. It will be east of Westport, how far I don't know, or just where. But you tell Sam where this place is. He can raise his men and head out along the road. These renegades will hit before dawn an' that isn't far off. He won't have much territory to cover."

"But what about you, Jeff? You'll be with 'em."

Jeff Cannard grinned. "I'm pretty used to takin' care of myself, Fred. Don't worry about me. You just get to Shem. And don't run into those fellows who will be headin' this way from Westport."

Fred turned toward his horse, then swung back and held out his hand. "Damn it, Jeff. I hate to go off an' leave you this way. I thought that maybe together—"

Jeff wrung his brother's hand. He was beginning to feel pretty good about Fred.

"We'll have lots of time together in the days ahead," he promised. "Take care of yourself, kid."

AFTER Fred had gone, Jeff mounted his own horse and moved slowly ahead in the general direction of the cabin. A faint frown settled over his face, and as he turned this situation over in his mind, the frown grew deeper and deeper. He didn't know what Potter would think when he walked in there alone. The man might even guess that Fred had been sent back with a message for Sam Shem, and if he figured that, without any question at all, he would change his plans. Besides, Jeff had no assurance that Potter meant to let him live until the hour of the raid. It might seem much simpler to Potter and the other renegades to kill him off as soon as he arrived and to carry his body with them.

The man Potter had set to watch for him rode out and covered Jeff with a gun. "Not so fast, fellow," he growled. "Where do you think you're headin'?"

"To that cabin," Jeff threw back. "An' be mighty damned careful with that gun!"

The guard didn't like that sort of talk and a muttered curse rumbled from his lips. But he had been given orders. He knew who this man was and that Potter was expecting him.

"All right," he snapped. "Get along to the cabin. Where's the other fellow?"

Jeff didn't answer. He rode on up to the cabin, dismounted, and tied his horse near by and then shuffled up to the door and shoved it open. The guard followed him.

They were waiting for him, Lem Potter and the same three men Jeff had seen through the chinks between the logs. And Jeff could tell at once that they were surprised that he

was alone. They had been expecting Fred too.

"Here I am," he said bluntly to Potter. "Thanks for the horse, anyhow, and the help outside the back door of the saloon."

Potter scowled. "Where's your brother?"

"He turned back. He's too soft a kid for this sort of thing. I told him he had better head back east."

Potter's eyes narrowed and Jeff knew that the man was considering his explanation.

"Where did the kid turn back?" he asked suddenly.

"Not far from here. Why? He didn't know where I was coming."

"And you didn't come right in?"

Jeff Cannard shrugged his shoulders. That meant that Potter had been aware that they had been following him.

"Why didn't I come right in?" he repeated. "Maybe it was because I wanted to think things over. Maybe I wasn't sure that I wanted to throw in with you."

"So you've got the whole picture, huh?"

"Do you think I'm so dumb that I haven't. You're up to the same tricks you tried two years ago, only on a bigger scale, Potter. In these days you're goin' in for raiding whole wagon trains, maybe painted up as Injuns and shooting a few arrows to make the thing look good."

Potter's face didn't change but the three other men stiffened. The one Potter called Brit was red-headed and bullet-eyed. One of his hands slid toward his knife. Jeff noticed that and whirled to face him. "Pull that knife an' see how quick you get your throat cut," he snarled. "Go ahead and pull it!"

Brit's face darkened. His hand closed on his knife and he took a step forward.

"Go sit down, Brit," Potter snapped. "I stand for no fighting among our men. You know that."

The man sucked in a long breath. He relaxed some but the anger didn't go out of his eyes. Backing away, he leaned against the wall.

"So you want to join us?" Potter asked.

Jeff shrugged. "Why not. I've got a few

scores to settle, and I might as well line my pockets while I'm doin' it."

A faint smile crossed Potter's lips. "Are you ready to ride with us tonight?"

"Sure, but keep Red out of my way."

Potter laughed, and there was something ugly in the sound. He said, "All right, Cannard. There's more of the boys on the way. Maybe we could play a little poker while we wait."

There was a crude table in the room and several box chairs. Potter took a seat facing the door and took a pack of cards from his pocket. The others drew seats close to the table, all but Red. He didn't move from where he was lounging against the wall, nor did he take his eyes from Jeff.

DURING the next half hour there was little talk. Jeff Cannard thought once that he heard a sound from the outside, a sound such as might have been made by the brushing of a stick against the logs but though he listened intently for a repetition of the sound, it didn't come again. The poker game wasn't steep, but Jeff didn't have much money with him and he lasted for only a few hands. After that he withdrew from the game and watched the play of the others. He had never seen a man handle cards more expertly than Potter. It was a pleasure to watch the smooth movements of his fingers and wrists.

The man who had been on watch for Cannard had been sent outside again, but some time before Jeff heard his hail, he became aware of the distant drumming of hoofbeats. The rest of Potter's band was approaching.

The realization sent a prickle of excitement racing through Jeff's body. He had moved one of the box seats back against the wall and was slouching there, apparently at ease. But he wasn't at ease, and neither were any of the others in this room, with the possible exception of Potter. Red still glared at him and the other men couldn't keep from sending an occasional sharp look his way.

Things had gone all right, so far, but an-

other test lay just ahead, and Jeff knew it. With the arrival of these men, his status must be explained, either as it seemed to be or as it really was. And whatever the explanation, from now on, the weight of the danger he faced was increased.

The hoofbeats grew louder and then Jeff heard the hail of the man outside. At that sound, Potter looked up from the game, threw down his cards, and got to his feet.

Voices sounded outside and then the creaking of saddle leather as men dismounted. Footsteps approached the door, and Potter, crossing over to it, pulled the door wide open.

Four men came in, men whose appearance was much the same as the others in the room, and at first they didn't notice Jeff Cannard.

"Funny thing happened on the way out here, Lem," said one of them. "We run into a fellow ridin' toward Westport. He looked like he might have been comin' from here but he didn't want to stop, so we had to do somethin' about it."

Jeff Cannard came slowly to his feet. A cold chill raked over his body and the muscles in his throat tightened up until he could hardly breathe. His hands were clenched, but he didn't know it.

"Well," said Potter impatiently, "go on. What happened?"

"Parks brought him down with as neat a shot as you ever saw, just creased his skull. Only here's what we don't understand, Lem. When we rode up to this guy he was tryin' to get up. Maybe he was out of his head, I don't know, but he was mumblin' about how he had to reach Sam Shem, about how he had some message for the scout."

Lem Potter jerked around and stared blankly at Cannard and the others in the room were also looking at Jeff. Red drew his knife and tested the edge of it with the ball of his thumb.

"So he had a message for Sam Shem," Potter breathed. "I wonder what kind of a message."

Jeff didn't say a word. He didn't move.

In Potter's eyes and in the expressions on the faces of the other men in the room he could read their judgment. In a whisper, one of the men who had been here all the time was explaining Jeff's presence to the men who had just come. He was identifying the man they had stopped as Jeff's brother.

"What message was it that he carried, Cannard?" Lem Potter asked flatly. "What did you ask him to tell the scout?"

Jeff still didn't speak. The men who had just come in had been carrying their rifles and several of them now covered him. He had only his knife to defend himself.

"We brought the fellow along with us," said the man who had told of Fred's capture. "Thought you might like to talk to him. He's pretty well conscious, by now."

Potter nodded. "Bring him in."

A COUPLE of the men left the room and came back, half carrying Fred Cannard. There was a bloody bandage around the youth's head. His face was very pale, and his eyes were haggard.

The two men who had been supporting him, suddenly released him and shoved him forward. Fred tried to stand, but couldn't. He fell against the table, clung to it for a moment, then slumped to the floor, rolled over and sat up. He looked at Jeff, moistened his lips and it seemed to Jeff that he attempted a smile.

"It's all right, Fred," Jeff said steadily. "We'll work things out some other way."

Potter stepped forward. "What were you supposed to tell Sam Shem?" he barked.

Fred Cannard blinked. He shook his head. "I don't remember."

Without any warning at all, Potter lashed out with his foot. His heavy boot caught Fred in the side and wrenched a cry of pain from his lips. Jeff started toward the man, but a rifle prodded him in the chest and held him back.

Profanity drooled from Potter's lips. He shouted his question again and when Fred didn't answer, kicked him once more. Fred

didn't cry out this time, but the force of the kick rolled him over on his side and his eyes closed, and by the way his body sagged he seemed to have lost consciousness.

A moment of complete silence followed and into that silence, the red-headed man spoke.

"What difference does the message make, Lem. It wasn't delivered. But I reckon all the cards are on the table now and it's perty clear what we've got to do. How about lettin' me use this knife of mine?"

Lem Potter wiped a hand over his face. He stepped back, looked at Jeff and then glanced at Brit. "Cannard's probably got a knife, too," he said dryly. "Shall we take it away from him first?"

It was clear that Potter didn't care much for Brit. Jeff had guessed that when he had listened outside the cabin and here was a proof of it.

A flush of anger came into the red-headed man's face. He moved toward Potter but Lem Potter only laughed.

"Go ahead, Brit," he nodded. "We'll see if you're as good as you say you are."

Brit jerked around and launched himself at Jeff, his arm slashing upwards in a swift thrust. Jeff had no chance at all to set himself for that attack, but he twisted out of the way as neatly as though the movement had been rehearsed. If his knife had been out then, the fight would have been over for there was an instant when Brit's side was uncovered to a direct thrust. However, by the time Jeff had drawn his knife Brit had jerked away and had recovered his balance.

Again he came in, once more in a rush and this time Jeff met him squarely, catching the man's knife wrist in his left hand and jabbing upwards with his own blade. Brit caught Jeff's knife wrist and for a long minute the two men strained against one another, each trying to twist free and to drive his own knife home.

They held one another almost motionless, muscle cramped against muscle, and though Brit was heavier and taller than Jeff, the

rigors of the past three years had woven a steel network into the scout's body. He didn't give ground and all of Brit's panting and heaving did him no good.

Around them, the others in the room were shouting encouragement at Brit or were taunting him. Jeff could hear them and he knew that it made little difference how the fight ended. Even if he killed Brit, his own end was decided. The swift thrust of a knife in the back or the blast of a gun would finish things for him. That lay ahead. This battle now was only a spectacle of entertainment, an interlude to murder.

Into Brit's eyes there came a sudden expression of fear. Jeff could feel the man weakening. His knife hand moved an inch closer to Brit's chest, then another inch, and another. The point of his blade caught in the cloth of Brit's shirt, pricked the man's flesh, and now a hoarse scream broke from his throat, the scream of a man who suddenly finds himself staring down the long corridor

of death and who is frightened at its shadows.

Potter laughed and moved abruptly forward, deliberately drawing his own knife. But he didn't reach Jeff. Up from the floor, in a convulsive leap, came Fred Cannard. He caught Potter's wrist, hooked an arm around the man's throat and jerked him backwards.

"I'm with you, Jeff," he called, and there was a lilt to his voice. "I'm with you again. Let's show 'em what a couple of Cannards can do."

BBRIT'S body sagged against Jeff and then slid to the floor as Jeff drew out his knife and stepped back. He saw Fred tearing Potter's knife from the man's hand. Fred was grinning. He knew the odds against them, knew how this would end, but still he was grinning.

"Sure, we'll show 'em, Fred," Jeff answered. "We'll—"

The other men in the room were closing



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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in, but what Jeff had been saying was broken off by a blast of rifle fire from the open doorway and then by shrill yells and more shots. He saw one of the renegades clutch at his throat and then go down. Another slumped over and then another. They had turned and were facing the door and a couple of them jerked their arms into the air and backed away.

Jeff looked toward the door, too astonished to move or speak. Framed there against the darkness of the night were Sam Shem and several other scouts, with smoking rifles in their hands. On the old scout's face, there was a look of grim satisfaction.

He came into the room, nodded at Jeff, looked at the men on the floor and at those who had surrendered. "Better tie up these skunks that are still alive, Ernie," he said to one of the scouts. "We'll take 'em in to Westport an' let 'em talk afore we decide what to do with 'em."

Jeff moistened his lips. "Where did you come from?" he gasped.

Shem chuckled. "Shucks, son. You didn't think I would let you walk into a mess like this alone, did you? All I needed was some excuse to make Potter call his band together. I followed you an' your brother when you left Westport, followin' Potter. An' I picked up a few of the boys to sort of help out. Tried to let you know I was outside, once, by scratchin' on the logs."

The old scout supervised the binding of

the men who had surrendered, then glancing at Jeff, remarked. "We've started our wagons across the river and afore I left I told Matt Weatherby the whole story. I reckon he'll be mighty glad to have you along and from what his daughter said, she'll be rather pleased, too. Only one thing I don't like. Women have a habit of spoilin' men who might be derved good scouts. I'm afraid, maybe, that she'll keep you in Oregon when we get there."

A warm feeling coursed through Jeff's veins and he was suddenly anxious to get back to the wagon train. Fred was standing near him and turning to his brother, Jeff said, "You're coming along to Oregon, too, Fred. The past doesn't matter out there. Only what a man is, matters, and I'm not worried about that any more."

Fred Cannard swallowed. "I'd like to go, Jeff."

Then Jeff Cannard threw his arm around his brother's shoulder and started with him toward the door.

Sam Shem grinned after them and when they were gone he chuckled and looked down at Lem Potter.

"Lem," he said slowly, "I reckon there'll always be skunks like you in the world, but your kind will never have a chance as long as there are fellows like those two. Come on, stand up! You're about to start out on your last ride! An' I'm in a hurry, 'cause I'm headed for Oregon." * * *

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

By M. Kane

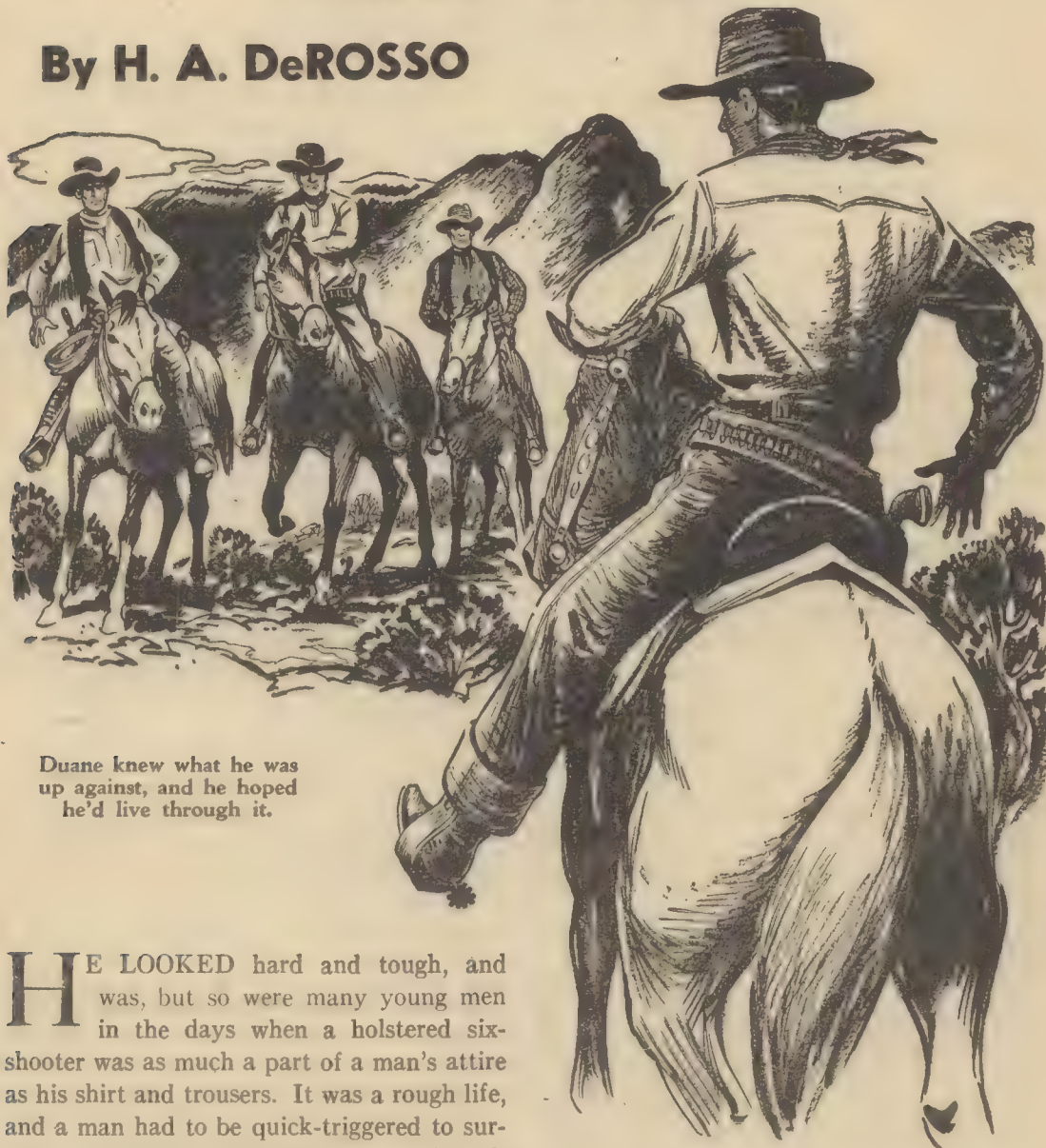
They give some contrary names to places in the West and maybe the prize should go to a certain canyon in the Wasatch Mountains. It is so forsaken and steep that an Indian wouldn't follow a limping deer into it, in the old days.

For that reason timid settlers found it a place of refuge from scalping parties and they gave it the name of "Little Zion." Brigham Young, leader of the Mormon emigrants, took exception. "It's not Zion at all," he stated.

So, obediently they named it "Not Zion." The name is still legal, and those who've seen it say a name couldn't have been more apt.

THE GUNMAN AND THE GIRL

By H. A. DeROSSO



Duane knew what he was up against, and he hoped he'd live through it.

HE LOOKED hard and tough, and was, but so were many young men in the days when a holstered six-shooter was as much a part of a man's attire as his shirt and trousers. It was a rough life, and a man had to be quick-triggered to survive. Everyone admitted that, and Will Duane was one of those who had no difficulty in staying alive.

Will Duane had, in the course of his twenty-two years killed two men but he'd done that according to the code of the country, so he did not consider himself a killer. When it came to the matter of laying his life on

A man is a mighty handy thing to have around a ranch, and a man who's as good with a gun as Duane, is sometimes a real necessity!

the line, Duane had killed and would kill to go on living. He had no great liking for his rugged existence, but had learned, early in life, that to keep from being shoved around, a man had to be hard and tough.

In truth, he'd come to the town they called Senecal on no errand of importance. He'd been working for the Staple outfit, but after fall roundup had been laid off. So he had crossed the mountain and Senecal had been where his money ended. He would stay, if he found work. Otherwise, he would ride on. His life was as simple and as lonely as that.

Duane felt the sun beating warm on the bright side of Baumholtz's stable as he lounged against it. It was good and warm on his back. But he had nowhere to go and nothing to do. He felt dull and miserable.

He heard a horse approaching and, looking up, saw its rider was a girl. She was wearing men's levis and sat the paint astride. Duane watched the paint move by at a walk and saw it was covered with white dust, as if it had come a long way. Its rider sat her saddle with an ease that said she had learned to ride before she had learned to walk.

Because she was pretty, Duane kept his eyes on her. She had been staring straight ahead, but she seemed to sense him watching her. She turned her head and looked at him. It was only a passing glance but it was hard and keen. When, passing on, she turned away, Duane grinned. Some gal!

He watched her ride down the street a way, pulled up the paint in front of the general store, dismount and hitch him up. After she had finished, she stood a moment with her head bowed, as if deep in thought, then turned and flashed with another look. As she stepped up on the boardwalk, she paused once more, with her head bowed pensively. Duane hoped she would throw another look his way as she entered the store.

Duane fished out the makings for a quirkly and studied them thoughtfully. He had enough to build another smoke, but remem-

bering he didn't have too much money, put them away. It was the slack season and he figured times would be pretty hard. He hitched his thumbs in his shell belt and just soaked in the sun.

Soon, he was drowsy and felt himself dropping off. Rousing himself with an effort, he looked up the street and saw the girl coming toward him. She was afoot now, walking with long strides and swinging arms. Duane watched her come and felt his heart quicken.

Stopping in front of him, she studied him with her hard, querying appraisal. It made him uneasy when it stayed a trifle too long on his tied-down .44 Colt. He gave her the eye right back. She didn't flicker.

DUANE looked her over. She stood about two inches over five feet and her figure was supple and slim. Around her pretty features, bronze hair dropped loosely to her shoulders. Her face would have been beautiful, Duane thought, if not for the hard glint in her gray eyes and the tiny, grim lines etched at the corners of her full-lipped mouth.

She finally spoke. "You're new around here, aren't you, cowboy?" Her voice was low and husky.

Duane nodded.

"You hired out to anybody?"

Duane shook his head.

Her lips thinned. "Well, cowpoke, you want a job?"

The question took him by surprise. He didn't know why she made him feel so uncomfortable and ill at ease. He kept remembering how she had looked at his gun. He stared at her and said nothing.

"I need a hand," she said, ignoring his silence. "I buried my father last week. I need someone to do his work." She paused. Her eyes were chill and dry. "You interested, cowboy?"

A slow smile played around Duane's lips. "I am," he said.

On the way to her ranch, she introduced

herself as Ada Greer, owner of the Rafter G. In the last three months, Duane learned she had buried her father and brother and now was handling the ranch alone. But she needed help, even during the slack season. Since she did not mention how her family had died, Duane did not ask. Death, in this frontier country, came in many ways.

Rafter G was not a very big outfit and Duane could see immediately that the three Greers had been more than enough to handle it. Its buildings were small, but sturdily built and well maintained; its corrals sound, and in excellent repair. The cattle Duane saw were sleek and fat.

Since there was no bunkshack, when Ada Greer told him he'd have to sleep in the barn, Duane shrugged. It was all right with him. It was obvious why no bunkhouse had ever been needed, the hands had all been in the family.

They'd arrived at Rafter G late in the day so Ada Greer was in the house getting supper and Duane was seated outside, having a smoke, when the rider came up. He was a big, hearty fellow in his middle twenties. He looked like the jovial, back-slapping kind but his eyes narrowed as they studied Duane and became almost hostile.

He nodded curtly as he passed Duane, then went into the house as if he owned the place. Inside Ada Greer sounded real happy to see him.

The taste went out of Duane's cigarette and he rubbed it out, and tossed it away. In the process, though he did not mean to eavesdrop, he couldn't help overhearing what was being said just inside the door.

The stranger had a big, booming voice, which, even when he tried to control it, still carried a good distance. "Who's the puncher outside?" he asked.

"His name's Duane," said Ada Greer. "I hired him today."

The stranger's voice rose. "You hired him?" he roared.

"That's what I said, Dave."

Dave snorted. "You mean he's going to

stay here, in the house with you?" he cried.

Whoever he was, Dave was a little thick between the ears, Duane thought wryly.

"Of course," said the girl. "He's working here, isn't he?"

"Dammit, Ada, you know what I mean. There's only you here and now there's him and no one else around and—"

Ada laughed. "Don't be such a child, Dave. I can take care of myself."

"Well," said the stranger, "I won't have it. I'm going to get somebody to stay here with him."

"Heavens, Dave! He's going to sleep in the barn!"

"I don't care where he sleeps. I'm going home and bringing back old Pete Sabin," said the stranger.

The girl laughed shortly. "Oh, Dave, you're fussier than an old woman." She sounded exasperated.

"He's a drifter. You don't know anything about him. I won't leave you here alone with him, Ada. That's final. I'll go get Sabin right away."

"Won't you stay for supper?"

"No!"

With that, the fellow called Dave stormed outside. His foot barely touched the stirrup as he bounded up into the saddle. Settled in his kak, he threw a stern, calculative look at Duane then spun his horse around and went off at a gallop, as if he was trying to outride a stampede.

After Dave left, Duane sat for a while longer, watching the sun going down behind the distant peaks. Sometimes, at the dying of the day, he felt his loneliness more keenly than ever, but that night it wasn't quite so sharp or poignant. From inside the house, came the sound of pots and pans being moved about on a stove and the clatter of dishes as a table was set. To Duane, there was something strangely reassuring and comforting about the sounds.

When he heard her approaching the door, he rose and smiled. She nodded curtly. "You can come and eat now, Duane," she said.

Entering he left his hat outside on the bench, but wore his gun, not caring what she might think. Ada looked at the gun again as he entered but this time, her glance was more surprised than speculative.

She seemed slightly embarrassed. There was color in her cheeks but Duane reckoned that could have come from standing over a hot stove. "I suppose you heard me and Dave," she said.

Duane nodded.

"Dave doesn't mean anything," she said, the color still strong in her cheeks. "We're very good friends. He sort of looks after me now. He—he's kind of mixed up about why I hired you."

He sat down at the table. "I know why you hired me," he said quietly.

She stood there for an instant startled, her eyes widened as she stared at him. It was as if he had caught her in some guilty act. Slowly, the flush faded from her cheeks and that old hardness came back into her eyes. She said nothing and sat down across from him.

They did not speak any more. . . .

LATER, Duane spread his blankets on some straw in the barn and went outside. Night had fallen, clear and cold, and there was the smell of impending frost in the air. Up at the house a single window glowed with light. Seating himself on a wagon tongue, Duane watched the light until it went out. It was like watching the inside of his heart.

At last, feeling sleepy, he went back inside and lighted a lantern but hearing hoofbeats in the distance, Duane went outside again in time to see two riders pull up in front of the house. One of the riders was Dave.

Ada Greer came out. She and Dave talked a while. Presently, the rider who had come with Dave started toward the barn. Amused, Duane pegged him for the chaperon.

The rider turned his horse into the corral and then, came into the barn, carrying his roll. He was quite old and his hair, the

color of frost, half-heartedly fringed a wrinkled, leathery face. He walked with the stiff gait of one whose joints grew rheumy with the advent of the cold seasons. "The name's Sabin," he said. "Pete Sabin."

He nodded curtly and Duane returning the gesture, watched while Sabin arranged some straw and fixed his blankets. From outside, came the sound of a horseman riding away.

"You gonna chaperon me?" asked Duane. He could not quite keep the amusement out of his tone.

Sabin looked up, with a bit of color in his glance. "You can't blame Dave," he said. "He's mighty stuck on Miss Ada. The two of them most likely would have got married if it wasn't for the Greers passing away. Dave is mighty worried about Miss Ada being here alone."

"Well, she isn't alone any more," said Duane. He peered hard at Sabin. "How come the Greers passed away so close together?" he asked.

Sabin shrugged. "They couldn't pull iron fast enough," he said. "You mean you don't know about it?"

Duane shook his head. "I'm new around here," he said. "I just pulled into Senecal today."

"Well," said Sabin, his eyes shrewd and appraising as he studied Duane, "you've probably run into things like this. You look like you've been around. There's a big man hereabouts who owns the biggest ranch and most of Senecal. Hugh Ballantine's his name. Funny thing is he ain't satisfied with what he's got. He's always reaching for more like he was brought up without no manners.

"He's got a couple of gunmen working for him by names of Zack August and Jeff Landrum. Well, when Ballantine wants a particular piece of land and the owner don't want to sell, then either August or Landrum picks a fight with the owner and then Ballantine's judge rules self-defense. That's how it was with Bill and Jim Greer."

"Ballantine still hasn't got Rafter G."

"I know," admitted Sabin, "but he scared a couple of others into selling out at his own price. You see, son, Bill and Jim Greer were kind of leaders of the small outfits against Ballantine." He eyed Duane's tied-down Colt. "Didn't you know any of this when you signed on?"

"I'm drawing cowpuncher's wages," Duane said wryly. "I tie my holster down to keep it from crawling up around my neck. . . ."

MUCH later, Will Duane rode out to the west end of Rafter G, where it butted up against Hugh Ballantine's vast Windowsash holdings to check a cow for a cut on the ankle. He'd treated the dogie's a couple of days before and had ridden out for a look at the animal.

When he found the cow, he roped and threw it, examined the cut and finding it was healing, let the animal go. He had just mounted his bay when he spied the three

riders. They had come up while he had been busy with the cow and they had halted a little way off. Duane's eyes narrowed as they caught the brand on one of the horses. The brand was Windowsash.

"Hey, you!" one of the three called.

He was a big man, big in the shoulders and hips and paunch, with a large, fleshy face. He rode a milk-white mare and he was slightly out in front of the other two, like a king preceding his retinue. The tone of his voice proclaimed that he was accustomed to being obeyed.

"Come over here!" he called to Duane.

Duane slouched a little in the saddle and crossed his wrists on the horn. He made no move to start his bay. "You the new foreman of Rafter G or something that you're giving me orders?"

The big man reared up in his stirrups in surprise and indignation. "Didn't you hear me? Come over here! I'm Hugh Ballantine."



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"I don't care if you're the Czar of Russia."

Ballantine's face purpled and his cheeks puffed out as if he were about to bust a gut. One of his henchmen spurred his horse out in front, coming between Ballantine and Duane.

"You're a sassy hombre, ain't you?" the fellow said.

It took Will Duane only the briefest look to size up the man. With his thin, bony face and cruel yellow eyes, he looked like a tough customer. He, too, wore a gun in a tied-down holster, but not for protection so much as for show. He was a hired killer.

"Easy, Zack," said Ballantine, spurring his mare to the front again. He looked as if it stifled him to breathe behind any one's back. Flanked by his two gunmen, he pulled up about five feet from Duane.

"I've come to offer you a job, kid," Ballantine said.

"I've already got one," Duane said quietly.

Ballantine winked. "I'm sure you'll find my pay bigger and more satisfying than Rafter G's and—"

"Save your breath. I'm not interested," Duane said.

Ballantine's face flushed and his lips pouted angrily as if he were not accustomed to having his wishes denied. "Either you're with me, kid, or you're against me," he cried. "Windowsash means business."

"I'm with Rafter G," said Duane.

Ballantine's face hardened. "I'm giving you one last chance, kid. You look like the kind of man I can use," he said. His eyes rested on Duane's gun. "You can go a long way with me, kid. Windowsash is on the way up. Rafter G is just about finished. Be smart and pick a winner, kid. This is your last chance. You with me?"

"I'm with Rafter G," Duane said quietly and straightened in the saddle.

HE KNEW what it meant even before he spoke. His throat constricted and there was the fleeting rush of fear in him. Then it

passed and he was cold, and grim, and expectant. He knew what he was up against. He lived through it before, and he hoped he'd live through it again.

Ballantine had reined his mare to the side. In a time for violence, he had instinctively withdrawn from the center of attraction. Violence was for his henchmen. It was what they were paid for.

For a moment, Duane thought he would have to take both men on together, but finally, thin Zack August said, "How's about flipping for him, Jeff?"

Jeff Landrum nodded grimly. He ran to bulk and had a red, beefy face, "Heads," he said.

"Flip," said August. His eyes never wavered from Duane's face.

They might have been deciding who was to buy the first drink they were so casual about it. Winking in the sun, the silver dollar rose and fell. Landrum caught it and gave it a look.

"You lose, Zack," he said.

Snorting his disappointment, Zack August reined his roan away a little to give his partner room to work in. His studied, cruel deliberateness brought a blaze of wrath to Duane's brain but, with an effort, he contained himself, realizing it was no time for him to be losing his head.

Landrum settled himself just so in his kāk and, freezing for a moment, he tried to stare Duane down. Then Landrum drew.

Pulling his gun, Duane fired. He did it with the practiced ease and speed of an old hand. Landrum's gun was out, the bore gaping at Duane's chest, but Landrum never got around to snapping off a shot. A slug slammed into his heart and his gun dropped from lax fingers. His mouth slacked open as, without a sound, he pitched headlong out of his saddle.

Quickly, Duane covered Zack August while the thin gunsel was still caught up with surprise. The shock had worn off when August looked up. There was murder in his eyes.

To the side, Ballantine sat on his white mare, stunned. He was so accustomed to having everything come off according to plan that he could not conceive of things going awry. His eyes showed his fear as he stared at the .44 in Will Duane's hand.

Duane said, "All right, Zack, you and him can git now. Come back for your chum later."

"This ain't the end of it, kid," Zack said. "I won't forget you."

Duane nodded. "I know," he said. "Come around when I'm real fast. . . ."

Duane said nothing about killing Landrum when he rode in that night but Dave Ward brought the news to Ada Greer the next day. While Pete Sabin and Duane were repairing a wagon, he'd ridden up with his usual haste and fury. Leaping to the ground, he'd barged into the house.

After a while, Ward emerged with Ada Greer and led her over to Duane, who put down his tools and waited.

He was feeling tense and restless inside. He did not know why.

He was beginning to think it had been a mistake to have gone to work for Rafter G. Every time he looked at Ada Greer, he knew it. Every day she fitted more and more into the aching void in his dreams. Then it struck him. He hadn't come to the Rafter G because he had needed a job. He had come because of her and was staying because of her. That was why it hurt him to think that Ward was her type of man. Duane was sure he wasn't good enough for her.

He felt Ada's critical eyes studying him and thought he saw worry and anxiety in their glance. He passed it off as a product of his imagination and wishfulness.

"Why didn't you tell me about Landrum?" she asked.

Duane shrugged. "I didn't want to worry you, I guess."

"That makes no difference," Ada said. "Don't you realize I've got to know everything that concerns Rafter G."

Duane nodded shortly. "All right," he said. "Next man I kill, I'll tell you pronto."

A flush mounted to Ada's cheeks. She opened her mouth to speak, but pressed her teeth down on her lower lip, without uttering a word.

But Ward's eyes were bright with excitement. "This is fine. This is just fine," he exclaimed. "The news about Landrum is going around like wildfire. If Duane can take Zack August, we'll have Ballantine licked. Do you understand, Ada? We'll be on top. We'll be the big augers then."

Duane felt sick. "Where does the 'we' come in?" he asked.

"Well, naturally," said Ward, his brows rising as if he could not conceive of such naivete, "when the time is proper, Ada and I will get around to it and make my Flying W and her Rafter G one spread."

Duane grinned. "That will make you a pretty big rancher, won't it?" he murmured playfully.

Ward's face darkened. "And what do you mean by that?" he growled.

Duane shrugged and said, "I mean, where were you when Miss Ada's father and brother were standing up to Zack August? Hiding in a rain barrel?"

"Listen here," Ward cried indignantly. "You can't talk like that to me."

Duane set his feet apart, and placed clenched fists on his hips. "Why can't I?" he asked.

WARD fought the same way he walked and talked, with flamboyant abandon. He started with a roundhouse swing that got nowhere, but whose force turned him half around. On the rebound, Duane stepped in, and, while Ward was still off balance, swiftly slammed him one in the belly and one on the jaw.

Ada Greer's eyes were blazing. "Stop it, Duane. Stop it at once!" she cried.

Breathing hard, Duane faced her squarely. "Don't worry," he said evenly, "you can have him for your wedding day."

Ada flushed. "You've got no call to talk like that. You've got no call to go around insulting people," she cried.

Duane finally knew what he wanted to do. It made him feel relieved but also a little sad. "I won't insult anybody any more," he said. "I'm leaving."

Ada's face paled. "You mean that, Duane?" she whispered.

He turned and faced her, and as he looked at her, he felt the pain start in his heart, the pain that must have been there from the first time he'd laid eyes on her. "Listen," he said, "when I hired out to Rafter G, I hired out to you, Miss Greer, and I knew all along why you hired me. That was all right with me, see?" He paused. "I knew what you were up against and I went all the way for you—but this is the end of the line."

He drew a deep breath and then said, "When I risked my skin for you, I didn't do it out of loyalty. Maybe you know why I did it, now. But you forgot that my gun and my life aren't up to be bargained for by a big blowhard who is interested in only what he can get out of it. I'm sorry you forgot. I was beginning to like it here."

He didn't wait for her to speak. He strode away. . . .

Later, after stowing his gear, Duane leisurely rode into Senecal, intending to tie one on. All anger and regret inside, he figured that the best way to blow off some steam was to liquor up. But after he'd downed his first two drinks, he realized drinking wasn't for him.

Knowing he had to get out of Senecal, he was reluctant to leave. Something held him down and he knew what it was. The hopelessness of it made him angrier still. He wanted to break his last tie to her, but he knew her memory would never die in him. He felt sad at not having told her.

Frowning, he went to Baumholtz's stable to get his horse and no sooner had gained the shelter of the wide door of the barn than Zack August and Hugh Ballantine came riding down the street. Unaware of Duane,

as they passed, they rode on out of view.

Discretion made Duane want to take his horse and leave Senecal, but his heart told him otherwise. He considered all the angles of it: how Dave Ward stood to gain everything; how he, Will Duane, stood to lose his life. Finally he forced himself to believe that Ward didn't enter into it at all. It would be for Ada he'd be doing what had to be done.

He loved her, that much he knew, that much could never be taken from him. The knowledge that she needed him seemed both sweet and sad to him. Whether her need was for a selfish or a noble cause, was not for him to judge. For it was inevitable that someday he would die, and, according to the pattern his life had taken, his death would be violent. If he died, he wanted it to be for something that was dear to him.

He started down the main drag. Walking slowly, he relished the fresh scent of the air. The sights around him were made more precious by the realization that this might be the last time he saw them and as he walked along, he was conscious of the weight of the gun on his thigh. If it was fated for him to use that gun, he'd use it in a good cause.

HUGH BALLANTINE and Zack August were on the gallery of Dutcher's Hotel. Ballantine was talking volubly to someone Duane didn't know, and, as usual, monopolizing the conversation. Beside him idly leaning against a support of the gallery, Zack stared off into the distance.

Duane came to a halt in the middle of the street and waited for August's glance to shift over to him. When it did, Duane spat. August glowered and then, jabbed an elbow into Ballantine's ribs.

Breaking off in the middle of a sentence, Ballantine turned. His jaw dropped in astonishment when he spied Duane but he quickly recovered. His flat glance raked Duane hard.

It was showdown time, and Duane would

have to face Ballantine and August working as a team. Since they had seen him take Jeff Landrum, and they knew how good he was with a gun, Duane figured on their trying to overcome him by drawing on him simultaneously.

With quick motions, Zack August stepped away from the gallery support. His eyes blazed in anticipation of a fight. There was the hint of a smirk on his mouth. Crouching, he poised his hand above his holster.

In the oppressive silence, Duane kept his glance on August, waiting for August to make the first move. When August's hand dipped, Duane drew and fired, just a shade ahead of the gunsels. His bullet took August in the chest and slammed him back. For a moment, he wavered, then toppled to the dust.

In the nick of time, Duane whirled on Ballantine. The big man was better than he had thought. A gun was in Ballantine's hand and even as Duane fired, something banged him in the left shoulder and caused him to fall back a step. But his bullet tagged Ballantine in the throat and the cowman dropped his gun and clasped both hands against the front of his neck desperately trying to plug up the wound. Lurching crazily, Ballantine started to move away, making strangled, unintelligible sounds. He took half a dozen steps before his knees gave way.

By this time, Zack August had rolled over into a sitting position. His gun was again in his hand. Duane swung back and fired once more in his direction. The bullet took Zack August in the chest. It was a painless, instant death.

It was all over now, Duane thought, and he was still alive. The numbness was fading from his shoulder and the sharp pain shot through him. Wincing, he holstered his .44 and started down the street toward the stable, not caring for his pain, not wanting to know how badly hurt he was. All he wanted was to get away from Senecal—fast. Maybe in a new place, he could forget.

By the time he reached the stable, Duane's

shirt was soaked with blood but he made the protesting barnman saddle the bay and give him a boost up into the kak. As he rode away, the world was spinning about him and he thought it was funny how dark and dim everything looked even though it was the middle of the afternoon. He had to clutch the saddlehorn with his good hand to keep from falling out of the kak.

He knew he should stop and try to bandage the wound, he was losing too much blood. But he wanted to put some distance between himself and the town. He wanted to be alone with his hurt and his grief.

Finally, he stopped the bay and could not step down. He just released his hold on the saddlehorn and rolled out of the kak. He hit the ground on his good shoulder and waited for the spasm of agony that racked him to end. Then he crawled to a boulder and leaned his back against it. He just sat there, breathing hard and listening to the throbbing of the pain in his body. Suddenly, he blacked out.

He had just come to, when Ada Greer found him. She galloped up on her paint and was out of the saddle before the horse had come to a halt. Running to Duane, she set right to work at his wound.

"Oh, Will, Will," she kept saying. "I followed you into town to ask you to come back to the spread. It's all over between me and Dave. What you said to me before you quit finally opened my eyes. So I came to Senecal to ask you to come back and they told me what you'd done. Won't you come back, Will?"

She tied a snug bandage around his shoulder and as the flow of blood ebbed, Duane's head slowly cleared. Then looking at the earnest expression on her face, he began to know a sweet happiness.

"I'll come back," he said, "but on one condition and that is that I don't want no more chaperons around. After we're hitched, I don't aim to sleep in no barn any more."

Very prettily, Ada blushed. "Of course not, Will," she said. ☆☆☆

RAW LAND, HARD LAND!

By DAVID STEWART

They were hanging the killer today, and the Reigel family could once again feel secure. . . . Then, that night, they heard the stealthy footsteps, saw the merciless eyes at the window. . . .

THE NESTER, Carl Riegel, led his work mare from the shed slowly, so the eight-year-old boy on crutches might keep up with him. He looked silently at his wife, Martha, who stood on the back porch and tousled the boy's blond hair

before he swung up to the mare's broad back.

Tommy tilted his slight body backward on the sturdy crutches which Carl had made for him and grinned up at the nester. Riegel looked briefly at the boy's twisted and use-

"I'd stand real still if
I were you."



less legs, and there was courage for the youngster in his voice as he said, "One day when we have money, you will have an operation, and then you can ride away from the house beside me. Now you must stay with your mother and be a good boy while I'm gone."

Tommy swung away on his crutches, and from the porch Martha called, "Carl, you are forgetting again."

"I am only going to help Jim Martin take in his hay," Riegel said. "I need no tools for that." Then he nodded. "Oh, yes, the gun. I am forgetting the gun again."

He swung down from the mare's back and walked to the house. From a peg inside the door he took a heavy belt and six-shooter and quickly strapped it about his waist. "It is a thing to weigh a man down while haying," he said, "and what good would it do me if I needed it?"

He saw the fear suddenly revealed in her eyes, and immediately he regretted his remark. She stepped closer to him and touched his arm. "I'm sorry, Carl, but even while they hold him in jail, I am afraid of him."

"They will hang him today," he said, "and then you need be afraid no longer."

Riegel glanced suddenly at Tommy. "We must not talk so much for young ears," he said. "Let us count our blessings, Martha, not our fears. It is a hard land, but we have a chance here which we never had before."

"It is a sinful thing to say," she said, "but I will be glad when I know he is dead."

"The truth is never sinful," he said. "I have had the same thought myself." He glanced up at the rising sun. "Martin will be wondering where I am." He kissed her gently, walked to his horse, and waved as he mounted and turned the mare from the yard.

The gun pulled at his waist, and when he was out of sight of the house he dropped his hand to its butt and shifted it backward on his hip. He urged the mare to greater speed, and he tried to think only of the

hard, clean work which lay ahead of him in Jim Martin's hay field. Still the memory of the fear he had seen in Martha's eyes would not leave him.

She had been a little afraid of coming west at all, and what happened after they had decided definitely had not made it easier for her. The doctor's opinion that she might never bear a child came a month before they left, and had hurt her deeply, and much of her enthusiasm at leaving old friends behind for a new life had withered and died before they had been long on the road.

The journey had been hard, and many things happened along the way to lower her spirits. It was a wild and tough country, and they had learned early that farmers often found it a lonesome and cruel land. They had come to this fertile valley just beneath the mountains, and in the town of Two Fork had learned that this range was used by a great and sprawling outfit branded Circle Y. They had also heard that a man named Yontz claimed the land and regarded laws made by a distant government as only fancy bits of paper.

From a disinterested land agent they received a broad warning, but Carl could not forget his own pleasure with the land and the expression on Martha's face as she walked through a stream-fed meadow of waving grass and prairie flowers. "Is it government land," Carl asked, "and is it for sale?"

Within an hour that same afternoon, Carl had settled on his boundaries and paid his fees. With a part of their remaining funds he bought a rifle, and they drove their wagon out of town to the spot he had chosen. With nothing but his two hands and the tools brought from the East, he put up their first house, and within a month he was ready to break ground for the first planting.

IT WAS then that trouble came to them—suddenly and without warning. One night they were awakened by the rumble of pounding hoofs and the rattle of gunfire. Carl

went to a window and saw a knot of mounted men tear up a fence which he had built where the stream formed a waterhole, and he heard their bullets chunking into the sod walls of his house.

He found Martha in the darkness, and a deep, swelling anger rose within him, as he felt her trembling against him. He told her to lie on the floor, and he took his rifle and ducked out into the moonlit night. He lay flat in the shadows near the side of the shed which sheltered his horses, and without hesitation he lined his sights on the horse of the lead rider.

His single shot silenced them, and the scream of the horse as it went down was not a pleasant thing to hear. "Take him up now and get off my place!" Riegel yelled. "The next shot won't be for a horse!"

For a moment the group of riders milled aimlessly, and Riegel shouted. "You are brave men to attack a man and his wife in their sleep with only six riders. Get off my land before someone is hurt!"

An angry murmur rose from the riders, but they knew that they were sharply silhouetted in the moonlight, while he lay concealed. After another moment of pointless circling, they took up their dismounted leader and rode away. Riegel lay unmoving in the darkness long after their hoofbeats faded into the night, and then he walked to the house and tried to soothe Martha till she would sleep.

At the sight of his broken fences and the horse near the waterhole in the morning, Riegel's anger was renewed. When he saw the Circle Y brand on the dead animal, he hitched up his team and threw the saddle from the horse into his wagon. He took his rifle from the house, and to his wife he said, "I'm afraid this is a thing which must be done, Martha."

From his yard he drove straight across the range to the headquarters of the Circle Y. When three riders from the ranch came to circle his wagon, he held his rifle across his knees and kept his eyes fixed upon the ranch

house, making an effort to ignore them.

Merle Yontz was waiting on his front porch. He was a heavily-built, white-haired man dressed as his riders were, but set apart by the authority in his bright, blue eyes. Yontz's cool glance settled upon Riegel's unsmiling face, and the rancher said, "Nester, there are a dozen men in this yard who would kill you if I lifted my hand."

The anger within the nester was a near physical force which blazed from his eyes. He shifted his hands so his rifle muzzle pointed toward a spot not a yard from Yontz's chest, and he said, "I don't give a damn! I came to return property which does not belong to me, and I will be grateful if you keep your hands off that which is not yours. I don't want trouble, but I'm not afraid of you. If you wanted my land you should have paid for it. You will not take it from me for nothing."

Then he laid down his rifle and turned his back on the cattleman, stepped into his wagon and threw down the saddle he had brought with him. "The fence your riders tore down, I put up to fence off the waterhole so your cattle might drink there. I will put it up again. We can live as neighbors, but I will resist any effort to drive me out. Do we understand each other?"

Merle Yontz held his level gaze upon Riegel for another moment, and then, surprisingly, he smiled. "Nester," he said, "you couldn't have said it plainer. You are the first sodbuster I've known with the guts to get his back up. My men will not bother you again."

"For that I thank you," Riegel said, and drove from the cattleman's yard.

At home, he said to his wife, "It is over and done with, Martha. They will not bother us again. I will put the fence back up, and we can start getting in our crops."

She did not smile for him, and her voice was dull as she said, "I cannot help thinking it is a terrible land, Carl."

He turned about on the wagon seat, and looked down at her with some harshness.

"It will not be easy, Martha. We must be as tough as the land."

For the next month they slept soundly, and Martha added woman's touches to their rough home with its meager furnishings. Other nesters in the country made themselves known, and she found pleasure in having neighbors, no matter how distant. Carl put in his crops, and they finished up many of the chores involved in establishing a home.

It was one day while he was on his way to Jim Martin's farm that he ran into trouble of a type which no man seeks.

That day, too, he rode with his rifle across his knees, for meat had been scarce on their table; and he hoped that he might see game along the trail. Hoping that he might have a better chance, he left the stage trail halfway to Martin's house and swung his horse up a hogback into more heavily timbered country. He followed this hump of ground paralleling the stage road for more than a mile without success, and then he turned his mount off the ridge and out of the timber.

BELOW him, the mouth of one of the many draws which dissected the ridge opened onto the trail, and behind a screen of bushes which concealed him from the stage road a single rider sat, intently watching a section of the trail which Riegel could not see. Through the forest, Riegel heard the wheels of the stagecoach running down-grade, and he saw a faint trace of its dust above the trees. He caught a glimpse of the fast-moving coach, and then he saw the waiting rider lift his neckerchief to cover the lower half of his face.

The screeching of brake blocks against iron tires came through the trees, and the afternoon silence was shattered by the sudden shouting of the stage driver at his team. The shrill scream of a frightened horse hung on the air, followed shortly by the sound of straining metal and splintering wood. The man below drove spurs to his horse, and jumped the animal out of sight onto the

road, heading toward the stagecoach.

Riegel drummed his heels against his horse's sides and plunged down the draw toward the trail. He checked his horse when he came in sight of the stage road, and for a moment sat his mount in the very spot where the bandit had waited.

Across the trail, he saw a barricade of rocks and logs, partly thrown aside where the stage had jumped the barrier before smashing itself to kindling against a boulder beside the trail. The stage horses were hopelessly snarled in their traces, and a lead mare was dead. A man who had tried to jump from the stage lay beside the trail with a broken neck.

Inside the splintered coach, Riegel saw a woman's yellow hair, and a small boy lay half-in and half-out of the stage, his legs pinned between the coach and the boulder against which it had smashed. The stage driver was standing on shaking legs in the center of the trail, one arm dangling uselessly at his side and blood streaming from a cut above his eyes.

The masked man had ridden to the front of the stage and was leaning from his saddle to tug at a squat metal box beneath the driver's seat. The driver watched helplessly and swore as his blood dripped into the dust. Riegel left his horse so the mare might not skitter beneath him and spoil his aim, and his hands and knees trembled violently with the sudden rage and shock which washed through him.

"Step off your horse or you're dead," he yelled, and the sudden shock of his enraged voice stopped the bandit with one hand on the strongbox. He turned his head very slowly and saw Riegel standing spraddle-legged in the road, his face white and the eyes behind his leveled rifle hot with the desire to kill. The bandit's gun was in his hand, and for a finger flick of time, the building of a decision within him could be seen plainly in his eyes and the slow straightening of his shoulders.

Riegel's, "I would like to have you try!"

drove hard at him across the road, and he let his gun fall as he stepped from his horse. To the stage driver Riegel said, "Get his gun, and let's see what we can do for your passengers. The man did as he was told, and they walked to the ruined stage.

The woman was dead, her skull crushed when she had been flung against the doorpost. The boy's chest rose and fell gently with his breathing, but the thought of what must have happened to his legs took the color from Riegel's face and again brought his hot glance to bear on the bandit.

The nester's arm shot out suddenly, and his fingers tore the mask from the bandit's face. "You are a dog, not a man," he said.

The bandit's mouth matched the irresponsibility of the off-shade blue eyes which had been unconcealed above the bandana. He had a thin mouth below a long, full-nostriled nose set between flat and high-boned cheeks.

"Frank Lawton!" the stage driver said, and the name rang a familiar note in Riegel's mind.

It was a name he had heard among other men on the range, a name often spoken, but never followed by a good word. Lawton had been a gunslinger before he came to this country. Men said he was a fast man with a handgun and with more than one killing under his belt. He spent more time hunting, card playing and drinking than he did working, and he had been heard to say that he would not go hungry as long as other men ran fat beef on their range.

Riegel fought the still-rising rage within him. To the driver he said, "Take his horse and ride to town for the doctor. I will hold him here and try to comfort the boy if he revives." He glanced at the woman inside the stage and the man lying dead beside the trail. "Were they his parents?"

The driver nodded and swung about to walk to Lawton's horse. Before turning the animal toward town he rode close to them, and without looking at Lawton said, "Leave me with him and let me kill him!"

Riegel shook his head, and the stage driver wheeled his horse and spurred off up the trail. To Lawton, the nester said, "Sit down, and don't move, or I will do what he suggested."

He held his gun on Lawton, leaned against the toppled stagecoach and looked down at the freckled, button-nosed face of the unconscious boy. When he moaned softly, Riegel put his hand on his forehead, and when his shock-brightened eyes opened, the nester said, "We'll have help for you soon. Try to be brave." His eyes turned again to Frank Lawton, and his hands were white with the force of his grip upon his rifle.

The sheriff and other townsmen came with the doctor. When the lawman saw the dead man and woman he turned a face pale with anger upon Frank Lawton and said, "It's too bad he didn't kill you, Frank. It would have been fitting for that to have been done by a nester."

LAWTON swung toward Riegel, and the perverted pride which was the core of the man straightened his shoulders and brought a derisive curl to his lips. "A dirty nester!" he said. "Sheriff, he didn't have the guts to kill me."

With pure rage a terrible thing in his eyes, Riegel stepped closer to the gunman. "You are a yellow dog and not worth a bullet," he said. "Let them hang you." Take him out of my sight, Sheriff."

Riegel helped free the boy's legs from the weight of the stagecoach, and he remained while the doctor did what he could for the boy. He held the boy's hands and let them bear down upon his own when the doctor moved the twisted legs. He tried to tell the child with his eyes that the moans which broke from his lips were nothing to be ashamed of.

He comforted the boy on the way to town, and he helped carry him into the doctor's office. He stayed while the youngster's legs were splinted, and after the boy had been drugged into sleep said, "Doctor, what will

happen to him now? He is all alone here."

The doctor shook his head. "His parents are dead, as you know, and there wasn't a thing in their luggage to give us a hint of where they were from. The man was a gambler and had few ties. There is no one around here to take care of him."

Riegel thought of Martha and the misery they had known at being childless, and his decision was not long in forming. "There is someone, Doctor," he said, "if such a thing can be arranged."

The doctor turned to face him directly. "Do you know that those legs may never be straightened?" he said.

Riegel nodded slowly. "That is all the more reason, isn't it?"

"I'll do all I can to arrange it," the doctor said. "That I promise."

Riegel rode home with some faint hope springing alive within him, and when he told Martha she could conceal her eagerness no more than he. She traveled to town with him the next day, and after fifteen minutes with the boy she had taken some of the fear from his eyes and made them round with her description of their land and the house they would build some day. When the doctor told them that they might take the boy within a week, there came to her eyes a calmness which Riegel had not glimpsed there since they left Ohio.

With his story about Frank Lawton, it was different. This brought to her eyes the same fear he had seen there the night his fences had been ridden down; and after she heard some of the stories about Lawton going about town, she insisted that he buy a handgun.

"He is a cruel man, with hard friends," she said. "Do you know that some men in town are betting that he will never hang? I wish you would buy a pistol, Carl, and carry it with you in the fields."

He bought the gun, and he wore it as she wished, but he knew that he would be pitifully slow with it if matched against a man like Lawton.

Now, on this day when they would hang Frank Lawton, he would wear the gun for the last time. It was not pleasant to be glad when a man was about to die, but as Riegel thought of the way Tommy hobbled about the yard on his makeshift crutches, he could feel no other way.

With a shaking of his head, almost as if he had just awakened from a sound sleep, Riegel hitched himself erect in the saddle and looked up the trail he was riding. He realized with a start that he was more than halfway to Jim Martin's place, and he could remember nothing of the familiar country he had passed on the way.

A smile at the deepness of his thinking moved his lips, and he thought, *I had better ask Jim to shake me occasionally this afternoon, or I may scythe down one of his fences.* With this his smile broadened, and he managed to put all thoughts of Frank Lawton and Martha's persistent fears from his mind.

MARTHA knew that morning as she watched Carl pass from sight up the trail that this day would drag for her, and she tried to make a mental list of things about the house and garden which would keep her busy. She was glad that Tommy was with her, for when she looked at him she could not feel so sorry for herself.

She let the boy help her with the breakfast dishes, and took him into the garden with her, letting him feel helpful and making him forget his crutches. She laughed and talked with the boy as she worked, and she managed to get through the morning without thinking too often of Frank Lawton.

She thought of him at noon, for the sun directly over their heads made her wonder at what time they hung a man. Was it at sunrise, or sunset? Or was that only in story-books? She wished she knew, for then she would know when he was dead. She chided herself for such aimless thoughts, and went into the house to prepare lunch and think of more pleasant things.

She managed to keep Lawton from her

mind all afternoon, but as supper time and sundown drew near, she thought of him again. As the fading sun cast its burning red glow across the land, she thought also of Carl riding home from Martin's alone, and, try as she might, she could not entirely cast aside her fears.

At sundown she thought of the possibility that Carl might have gotten away from Martin's earlier than he had expected, and she stepped to the back porch to turn her head and listen for any sound of a rider on the trail. Tommy clumped out beside her, and he listened too.

When she turned to go back into the house Tommy did not move with her, and she glanced back to find him staring round-eyed at the corner of the house. She followed his glance, and when she saw the man standing there she thought her heart would stop within her.

He stepped into plain view, and she saw the gun in his hand. It was then that she knew who he was. She knew by the fixed smile on his face, and by the way his hot eyes roved so boldly over her. *Like an animal looking at you*, Carl had said, and that fitted this man.

She thought of trying to reach the rifle in the kitchen, and the gun in his hand tilted upward. "I would stand real still if I were you," he said.

This she did, frozen with fear of him, and he stepped nearer. "You nesters are too easy," he said. "I could have come in and eaten your supper and you wouldn't have known I was around."

"I wasn't expecting anyone," she said, and she hated herself for the fear which crept into her voice.

"Leastwise not Frank Lawton," he said. "You were expecting they'd hang me today, weren't you? Well, they thought so too, but I told them I had some business to finish up."

His pride was flagrant and open in his voice, and she could think only of a small and vicious boy boasting that nobody could catch *him*. "Right out from under their

noses," Lawton said, "and they are so fooled they're beating the other side of the range for me. That's no easy trick. That's why I want to square things with the nester. He was filled with luck that day, or he never would have brought me in. I'm going to give him a chance to prove how tough he is tonight."

She forced herself to look directly at his face, and she saw how much this meant to his pride—the fact that he had been captured and held by a nester. To adjust for this, he would kill a man. No thought did he give to the reality that he had killed two people and crippled the boy at her side. He was truly an animal.

Lawton motioned with his gun toward the door, and he followed her closely into the kitchen. Inside, he stepped by her and took the rifle from its stand in the corner. He emptied the weapon and threw it on the floor by the door, and then he wheeled suddenly away from her, half crouching in the dim light, his face tilted forward, listening as a dog might listen for a noise from outside.

Then she heard it too, the sound of Tommy's crutches in the yard. It was a small, scraping sound, rapidly growing distant. "Outside!" Lawton rapped, and grasped her by the arm to half-lead and half-drag her out into the near-darkness. In the dusk, she saw the boy halfway across the garden, making his way toward the trail. "Bring him back!" Lawton said. "Quick!"

She caught up with Tommy near the far edge of the garden. He was crying, and he shrank from her as she put her hand on his shoulder. "Bad man," he said. "Go tell Carl."

"No, Tommy," she said, "You mustn't. You must come back with me."

He hesitated, still crying, and for a moment he struggled in her arms before he turned and returned to the house with her. Frank Lawton looked from the boy's face to Martha's, his lips drawn tight with rage. "Can he walk without those things?" he

said in his deep voice, filled with hate.

Martha shook her head. "Why, no, he can't."

"Then we'll fix him up right now," Lawton said. He holstered his gun. "Hold him up."

Martha stepped close to Tommy, her face white, and put her arms beneath his shoulders. Lawton took the boy's crutches from under his arms and laid them on the top step of the porch. "Now carry him inside," he said. "And he won't be trying to run away again."

She carried the boy through the house, and she heard Lawton follow her to the living room. Then he returned to the kitchen and rummaged about until he found her clothesline and a kitchen rag. He stuffed a piece of the rag into Tommy's mouth, and with the boy's belt he securely strapped his arms behind him. He motioned Martha toward a straight-backed chair near the table.

As he tied her arms and legs she shrank from his touch, and he laughed and ran his hand up her arm and over her shoulder, his eyes boldly tracing her again in the dim light. She opened her mouth to protest, and he silenced her with a piece of the same dirty rag with which he had gagged Tommy. She felt his breath upon her face as he tied the rag about her neck, and his hands lingered on her shoulders until she shrank from him again.

Lawton lighted a lamp in the front room, turning its wick as low as it would go, and then he disappeared from her sight into the kitchen.

She could only wait now, breathlessly, for the eternity which passed before she heard the sound of Carl's mare upon the trail. Tommy, too, heard the nearby hoofbeats, and he began to cry, a soft and terrible sound muffled by the cloth in his mouth. Feeling herself near hysteria, Martha tried to warn Carl with her thoughts. Again and again she told him to stay away, and when she heard him hail the house she prayed that he might become suspicious when he received no answer.

The sound of the mare's hoofs came into the yard, and she heard the rustle and thump of Carl leaving the horse's back. She heard him pause in the yard, and she prayed that he was not silhouetted by the moon which she could see rising above the land through the front window.

OUTSIDE, Riegel paused by the edge of the yard, made suddenly cautious and uncertain by his unanswered greeting. Where was little Tommy? The boy usually waited on the back porch when he had been away during the day. And why was the light within the house so dim? Could the boy be sick?

Riegel moved toward the house, and he sensed rather than heard the back door open within the shadows which blanketed the porch. He heard a gentle scraping on the porch boards, and he called, "Tommy? Martha?"

He received no answer, and he felt a warning chill touch the back of his neck. Almost without thinking, he took several rapid sideward steps, attempting to change his angle of approach so he might see through the shadows on the porch.

He saw a darker shape move within the shadows, and as this shape wheeled about to follow his movements, he suddenly made out the figure of a man moving rapidly toward the steps. He knew who he faced now, even before he heard Lawton's voice flatly say, "Here it is, nester!"

He drove his hand backward for the gun on his hip, and he saw the gunman reach the top step and double forward, with one arm lifting and pointing toward Riegel in the dark like a long finger. He saw the point of this finger erupt into flame, and he felt the breath of Lawton's bullet against his cheek.

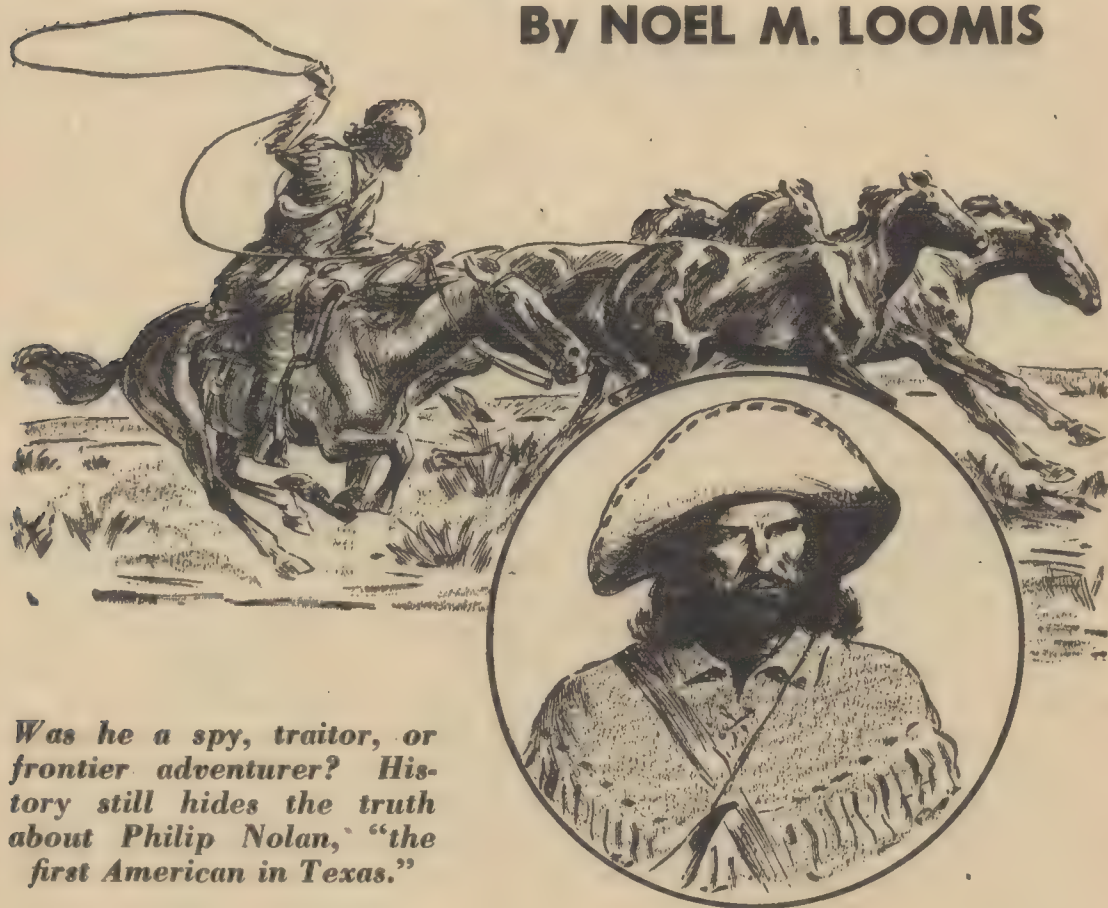
Riegel tugged at his gun, and he cursed himself for his slowness as he watched Lawton lurch sideways and saw his gun flare once more. His own gun was up now, and he heard its racket and felt its recoil against

(Continued on page 106)

GRINGO CABALLERO

Fact Story

By NOEL M. LOOMIS



Was he a spy, traitor, or frontier adventurer? History still hides the truth about Philip Nolan, "the first American in Texas."

WAS HE a spy, a traitor, an adventurer or a man of the frontier? No one knows, but one thing is certain: Philip Nolan, at the turn of the nineteenth century, knew Tejas (Texas) better than any other white man.

Tejas, first named for a tribe of Indians, at the time was a huge, uncharted province. By order of Spanish rulers, Americans were forbidden to enter. But the gringo had his eye on the rich land where grass grew tall and rustled under the galloping hoofs of wild mustang herds.

There were Americans who knew about this vast country's riches and wanted to live

there. Some of them looked upon Texas as the place to build personal empires.

It was a tremendous dream, for the land's potentialities seemed limitless. Intrigue was followed by counter-intrigue, as nations and men plotted against each other for control.

Philip Nolan had known of the vastness of Texas before his twentieth year. When he left Natchez in the spring of 1791 in search of adventure, he had been granted a passport by the Spanish authorities in Louisiana to round-up Texas mustangs.

He was gone for three years mingling with the Caddoes, the Comanches, the Tewas, and other tribes. Roaming wild and free, he

looked, listened and learned the lay of the land that stretched from the Rio Grande to the Red River.

On his return, he spent a few months participating in political intrigues.

There is some vagueness concerning Philip Nolan's political background and ambitions. It is known, however, that his sponsor was James Wilkinson, a general in the United States Army. According to papers in the Spanish archives, Wilkinson once had promised to bring the Western settlements under Spanish authority.

In 1800, Spain owned both sides of the Mississippi River at New Orleans and although the treaty of 1783 had opened the Mississippi River to American navigation, she was still hostile to United States expansion. River trade, in general, was closed to Americans.

Spain was, however, giving commercial privileges to a few Americans, and General Wilkinson, commander of the United States Army in the Southwest, was one of them.

There were over a hundred thousand pioneers on farms and homesteads in Kentucky and Tennessee, who'd settled there in the wake of Daniel Boone's pathfinding, with more constantly pouring in to ferret out their fortunes. General Wilkinson's trading privileges on the Mississippi seemed a boon to those who needed the Mississippi as an outlet.

But it was a touch-and-go period for the pioneers. Could they ally themselves with a Spain they didn't trust or break relations with American merchants, jealous of their development, or should they forge farther west and take the Southwest away from Spain?

There was governmental maneuvering and there were conspiracies and intrigues to build personal empires. General Wilkinson, far from the center of United States government, although a general, took an oath of allegiance to Spain, which he never kept. Working against the Spanish authorities, Wilkinson had schemes of his own for conquering the Mexican provinces and building an empire.

And there were those who thought that Philip Nolan, working more or less for Wilkinson, was a man who might give great service to the United States.

While he was in Texas, Nolan's correspondence was taken care of by Daniel Clark, an American consul in New Orleans. At one time, Clark forwarded a letter to Nolan from President Thomas Jefferson, who wished to know details about the wild horses of the Western plains. This would have been during 1800, or later.

CLARK had told Jefferson that Nolan was a man familiar with the territory. He said in effect that he considered Nolan a valuable man to the United States, he also endorsed him as able to negotiate enterprises that other men could not.

Perhaps Nolan was pleased, for it was well known that Jefferson was interested in the West. At any rate, he was probably flattered at having a president consult him for advice. But, from the course of Nolan's life and its decisive end, it might be concluded that he was less the man for intrigue and more the true lover of forging a frontier and roaming uncharted land.

Nolan's second trip to Texas seems to substantiate this. He registered in the census of Spanish citizens in Nacogdoches in 1794, swearing allegiance to Spain in order to get a passport. Called Don Felipe Nolan, he was a familiar figure—on a definite mission.

New Orleans, now under Spanish authority, had as its third Spanish governor, a Baron Carondelet, a man who considered himself quite familiar with Americans and their unscrupulous dealings. But he admitted them to the colony, and undoubtedly approved of foreigners in the outlying Spanish provinces. It was he who gave Philip Nolan a contract to supply the Spanish cavalry with horses. They were to be captured from the herds of wild mustangs in Texas.

For two years, Don Felipe Nolan ostensibly carried out his work, taking about 250 horses back to Louisiana, but there was more to

his trading than met the eye. For, with the best of the horses, all the new information that Nolan gained about Texas went back to Kentucky to Wilkinson, his friend and sponsor.

On the other hand, Baron Carondelet was getting what was left over from the horses, and only what information Nolan chose to give him of his province.

The baron must have been broad-minded though, for in 1797, Nolan secured another contract from him for more horses. Nolan's passport was good for thirteen months, and he carried trade goods worth seven thousand dollars.

This third expedition was even more of an adventure, and Nolan became a more important, dangerous, and feared man than he may have realized. He went south to the gulf below La Bahia and then followed the gulf coastline, scouting the land. Undoubtedly, he was making notations then on rude maps of bays and harbors where men might be safely landed from boats.

To keep up a front, Nolan continued trading and when he returned to New Orleans, he brought back with him thirteen hundred horses, and a very detailed knowledge of the Texas coastline.

It was on his return that he learned about Jefferson's interest in the information he could supply concerning the West, a fact that seemed to point at a bright future for Philip Nolan.

But Philip Nolan had sworn allegiance to the King of Spain, and when he reached New Orleans he found a new governor of New Orleans, Don Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, who combined the rare qualities of honesty, intelligence, and a desire to serve Spain well. No stranger to this territory, he had been commander of the outpost at Natchez and there had watched closely and studied keenly the patterns of intrigue. Thus he knew that Wilkinson was working against the United States and also knew that Nolan was in his pay. Wilkinson was deceiving both the United States and Spain, and Gayoso also knew that

he was working for his own advancement.

Gayoso, to protect himself as governor, took advantage of Wilkinson's fondness for drinking. Talking freely, the intoxicated soldier revealed that his plans for the land west of the Mississippi were not favorable to Spain. Gayoso further learned that Philip Nolan had given out information about Texas's harbors, land and distances.

SO, WHEN Nolan wanted to return to Texas, Gayoso would not give him another passport and going even further, wrote the commanding general of the internal provinces of Chihuahua recommending that steps be taken to keep foreigners from scouting the territory. He also stated that Philip Nolan was the most informed, and therefore, the most dangerous man who could enter the territory, and that he believed Nolan was hired by General Wilkinson as a spy.

Gayoso suggested that something be done to find Don Felipe Nolan and send him far enough away to keep him from causing any more trouble to the future of the Spanish territories.

The Texas capital, actually a sub-capital, was San Antonio, and soon a message came by riders from Chihuahua with news of a reward—forty horses for Nolan, or for information of his whereabouts in Texas.

The news was relayed from San Antonio to the northern and western outposts of Texas—Philip Nolan was wanted.

In the meantime, Philip Nolan, having been refused a passport to enter Texas, did not allow that to keep him from his job. He was paid to learn all about the land to the west, and he loved doing it. This time he would enter Spanish territory illegally.

Nolan seemed to have no fear of being caught. He expected to return and undoubtedly reassured his wife of this on their last night together. However, he did not return to her or his unborn son—the son who never saw his father and who did not live to carry on the name.

He left Natchez and rode north, along the

east bank of the Mississippi to Fort Nogales, where he crossed to the west bank. This was his fourth trip, taken in the fall of 1800. He was unafraid, for he knew the country better than any white man; he had been the first to explore it thoroughly. The Indians were his friends, and he knew their ways.

Nolan and his men pushed on deeper into Texas. They crossed the Ouachita below Fort Miro. Between the Ouachita and the Red River they nearly were captured by a Spanish patrol. They continued on across the Red, the Sabine, and the Trinity rivers, and skirted the settlement of Nacogdoches.

Deep in Texas, they made camp in the valley of a small stream that flowed into the Brazos do Dios River. Don Felipe Nolan wanted to spend the winter here.

They built a roofless fort, five logs high, as a windbreak and shelter against the driving winter wind. They built corrals to hold the captured mustangs. By this time provisions were beginning to run low, and some men thought they should be returning to the East for supplies.

Maybe the men grumbled, but Nolan could not be stopped from his dreaming; unknown distances were a challenge to him. He dreamed of Santa Fé, California, the Sierra Madres, and Mexico City. He recognized no limitations, and apparently he thought of none of the dangers. He may not have known to what extent the authorities were determined to capture him. He did not think about scouting the country around his horse-camp that winter or to keep scouts posted.

When spring came, Nolan and his mustangers had 300 horses in the corrals. Meanwhile, back in Nacogdoches, the commander of the garrison, Manuel Musquiz, received further information about the reward for Nolan.

A reward of forty horses would mean a great deal to the garrison, and so Manuel Musquiz, thinking too of the prestige he would gain by capturing Nolan, made careful preparations. He took one hundred twenty men with him, a brass swivel cannon on

mule-pack, and grapeshot on another mule.

Could Nolan have warded off this party if he had scouted the land and kept closer watch for approaching danger? Had Musquiz sent out men to find Nolan's whereabouts? At any rate, Musquiz came into the valley up from the Brazos at early dawn, and saw the sleeping horse-camp. He shattered the silence with scattered shots that killed the five outposts at the horse corrals.



"Get yourself killed. Who cares?" the chief told me. "But get in my way on this murder, Pike, and we'll use your thick skull for a channel marker!" That was my cue to set my course for the water-front killers, by

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25¢ **DETECTIVE STORY**
MAGAZINE

Nolan ran to the top log of the fort and, in a glance, saw the column of uniformed men, the cannon, and Commander Musquiz. As he leaped down, running among the sleeping men and shouting at them, his warnings were grim. Still fogged with sleep, they scrambled for their weapons, and Nolan ran to swing the gate shut to delay the advancing Musquiz men.

From the top log of the fort he shouted at the uniformed men and their commander, "Gentlemen, come no farther, for one of us will be killed!"

"*Entréganse—surrender!*" Musquiz commanded. "*En nombre de dios!*"

FOR HIS answer, Nolan slammed the gate to the little fort. He had, in this short period of time, planned his defense against the one hundred and twenty armed men. His men must make every shot count, and keep up the firing during the day. Then when night came, they would escape.

It was a brave plan and worthy of Nolan's fearless daring, but it didn't work. Perhaps Musquiz did not intend to make this a battle, for there is question as to who began the shooting. In Musquiz' report, he stated that Nolan's men opened fire first. Nolan's men charged that the Spanish began the shooting.

Philip Nolan did not live to submit his own report. A shot from the cannon killed him, early that morning of March 21, 1801.

With their leader gone, the mustangers did not continue the fight. They surrendered when Musquiz promised them fair treatment and were taken back to Nacogdoches.

Philip Nolan was dead. He was no longer a threat to the Spanish territory of Texas; his knowledge could help no one now. The guardians of Spain's frontier, in Chihuahua, San Antonio, New Orleans, and Madrid, thought they were secure but they were mistaken.

The restless spirit that had led Philip Nolan into the vast plains of Texas, churned in the minds and hearts of many other men—men who became the prairie men who snaked

long caravans over the dry plains; the mountain men who paddled the rivers and the streams to find the rich, thick furs; the *ciboleros* or buffalo hunters; the scouts; and the Texas Rangers.

This feeling of unrest inspired thousands of men from Kentucky and Tennessee to push on into Texas "to fight for their rights," thereby making the Alamo a part of the history of the United States. There was also Jefferson, the president who thought that the West was his country's destiny.

The guardians of the Spanish possessions in America soon saw that they had killed only the forerunner of the Western pioneer.

General Wilkinson was left to carry on his disloyal designs, making what use he could of the information given him by Philip Nolan. Still hoping for riches and power, Wilkinson entered into an agreement with Aaron Burr who also had grandiose ideas. Wilkinson later betrayed Burr also. He was implicated in the eventual indictment of Burr, but was released, though his reputation was severely damaged.

Whether Philip Nolan would have been found guilty of disloyalty to the United States, as a friend of Wilkinson, is not known. Perhaps he was only the tool of selfish men who wanted to build an empire for themselves. His was the love of exploring that came from the freedom of roaming the limitless territory, and his knowledge was temporarily useful to those unscrupulous men.

But in the broader sense, that knowledge finally worked for the good of all, making the pathway clearer for those who followed in his footsteps. Whether he intended to do so or not, Philip Nolan actually was serving his own country.

It is still a question as to exactly what was in the mind of Philip Nolan. He could have hoped for a high post from Spain, he may have expected a governorship when Wilkinson took over Louisiana. Or perhaps Nolan was fired primarily by love of adventure. We shall never really know. * * *

BLOOD-MONEY MAN

By CARL PRIME



There was a single shot . . .

WHEN you run the livery stable in a trail town, you see it all. It's like sitting on the high bar of a cattle chute; coming or going, they all pass by you. Occasionally, you'll ponder about a strange puncher, but mostly, you tend to your own business. Nobody here meddles. It just doesn't pay.

One time, our little town of Wagon Mound had a marshal who tried. Pete Rawson was his name, and the trouble with him was, he got to be reward hungry. Also, he was pure coward. What happened to him is a pretty good story, come to think of it.

As soon as Sheriff Rawson had the stranger locked up safe in his jail-house, he was licking his thumb, counting over the reward money that he hoped to collect.

It began on a rainy night in November, two years ago next month, when so much water had dropped that my place here stood in one big puddle. A strange rider slopped in and I could see that he was soaked clear through his fish. Water poured from the trough of his hat like out of a gutter spout, and he looked nearly as played out as his mount. I'd been trying to channel off some of the deluge to a vacant lot at the side of the barn, when I saw him and called out, "Howdy." As I laid my shovel against the barn wall, he asked if I could put up his mare; said he wanted her stalled in the barn, not turned out into the corral, and wanted her grained that night and again in the morning.

I nodded, and swinging open the big door, watched as the stranger took the saddle stiffness out of his legs and led in his mare. Once inside, first thing he asked was where he could find the telegraph operator.

"Over at the Palace, crying drunk," I told him. By the dim light of the lantern, I thought I saw his mouth tighten with disappointment so I added, "Might be able to sober him up in a couple hours."

"Let it wait," he said, shaking his head slowly. "It's already been three days."

I said no more, but began to help him off-saddle. His kak, I noticed, was single-rigged and the cinch was made of mohair, soft and easy on a horse's belly. There were Tackaberry buckles with full chafes under the cinch rings. That rider was mighty good to his mare, I was thinking when he slipped the near-side latigo and straightened. Then the swinging lantern light suddenly struck full on his face. At the sight of his hawk nose and the long, sharp chin, a cold hand slapped my stomach. His resemblance to Les was that close.

I took a breath and said, "Horse-stall, and grain is two dollars a day. Grain runs high here."

The man nodded. "All right," he answered easily. "I'll be riding out early in the morning." He had tucked his warbag

under his slicker and moved toward the door, when offhand he asked, "Where's the jail?"

"What you want there?" I asked, stamping down my curiosity.

He gave me a half-ashamed grin. "To beg a free sleep," he replied.

Now, a man who buys a stall and two meals of grain for his horse when he can't afford a bed for himself was far too good in my tally book for Pete Rawson's jail. I said, "Only dry place here is the loft. You're welcome to it."

Again, he tossed that little grin. "I won't mind the jail."

For a moment as I watched him slog wearily up the street, I wondered how far he had ridden to send that telegram, and why.

NEXT MORNING, the sun boiled out with a vengeance, and got right to work blotting up the muddy wetness. By ten o'clock it was steamy hot. Still, the hawk-nosed rider did not show up. For some crazy reason, I began to worry about him. Then, when Pete Rawson came down, I really smelled trouble. This Pete was an outsized, heavy-faced man, and whenever he walked with his shoulders set way back as he was doing then, it meant he was pleased with himself. The moment he handed me the *wanted* circular, I knew what he had done.

He was busting to tell about it. "I turned the key on a free-sleeper, trail bum last night," he said in his too-loud voice. "And this morning, checking through my circulars, whadda ya know, I found him. He leave his horse here?"

I ignored the question; I was studying that circular. The side-view pencil drawing looked fairly close, but the description below would fit half the Seventh Cavalry. The name above the drawing read "Lester Andrews," and this time there was a five hundred dollar reward for Les. He'd robbed a bank up in Colorado.

Rawson must have noticed my eyes returning to the name. He drawled, "Common enough handle, isn't it, Clem?" I didn't miss the meaning, but dropped it there.

"Would a wanted man ask to sleep in jail?" I fired at him.

For a long second he was silent. He hadn't thought of it; he was that stupid. Abruptly he shrugged his shoulders, "How would I know?" he snapped out. "I'm telegraphing Colorado to come and get him. If he's the wrong man, they can turn him loose—after he pays me his board bill."

For a long time, I had been itching to hit Rawson. But after a tight moment, I said, "I'll go see him."

I could see Rawson's heavy lips start to form, "Why?" then pinch the word off. He said stiffly, "Only if I'm there. He's a slick customer, he is. Tried to make me believe his trail herd for Caldwell was rustled, and this his name is Calloway. He wants to telegraph for help. That's a joke."

"Sounds like truth," I said, meaning it.

"Sounds like jailbreak company," he answered. "And he won't get it."

"I'll go see him right now," I said, feeling empty inside.

"Too busy," Rawson said impatiently. "I might be able to make it around noon."

It was after one o'clock when Rawson slouched up to the jail. Inside, he stuck close as a fly to a ripe carcass. To make talk, I asked Calloway about that queer-looking brand his mare carried.

"My own outfit," he said. "Or was, until I lost a thousand head and two riders on the Goodnight. One is dead and the other took a slug through his lungs. I call my brand Seashell. It's registered in Arizona

Territory." He glanced meaningly at Rawson.

I didn't stay at the jail long, because the one thing I could have done for him, I just could not bring myself to do. Rawson had that young fellow whipsawed in as dirty a deal as he had ever pulled.

And I was in a sweat, because I knew he was not Lester Andrews. Nobody here knew about Les.

Next morning early, Rawson came down to get his horse. While he saddled up, he said, "Heard from Colorado. They'll bring down a witness to look at that trail bum in a couple weeks."

"A couple weeks!" I shouted. "His herd will be long gone and sold, and you know it!"

Rawson said slowly, "There's a five hundred dollar reward for that fellow Andrews. No harm in holding that hombre."

I felt a tightness rise in my chest and my voice got shaky. "Take your horse and get out of here, you snake, and stay out!"

Rawson's face went white, then his big fists doubled. He took a step toward me. I grabbed my old .44 off the cash box and thumbed back the hammer.

"I'd enjoy killing you," I said though my teeth.

Right then, I saw what Pete Rawson was made of. His eyes showed rank fear, and as he backed away, sweat was popping out below his hat brim. "Put that thing down Clem," he said in almost a whisper. "I wasn't going to hurt you."

He must have realized what he was doing; a deep red color shot through his face and his pig eyes narrowed. Without a word he spun on his heels and led his horse from the stable.

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of Fifteen Western Tales, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1952. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger, Publisher, Sworn to and subscribed before me this 7th day of October, 1952. Eugene Jelinek, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in Bronx County, No. 03-1962300. Certificate filed in Bronx and N. Y. counties. My Commission expires March 20, 1953. (Seal)

I knew then that I had to make my play. It was a long draw, but my conscience kept prodding me to finish out the hand. Before noon, three telegrams were on the wires. One of them, I knew, would get to Les, wherever he was hiding out.

It was two nights later, shortly after midnight, when Les rode in. He hadn't changed much in three years. His hawk nose was still set between hard, deep-welled eyes and his mouth was a long, thin line of coldness. Those eyes, like a hungry cougar's, were forever on the prowl. Across a bottle of rye, I told him how things were; and I hoped he would see it my way.

And when his mouth began to laugh—though his eyes didn't—I knew he would do it. I noticed then, that his eyes sparked with the love of recklessness that always had been in him. A smooth trail, Les used to say, was no fun to ride.

Afterward, when he said thinly, "I'm looking forward to meeting this Rawson," I knew he really was.

PETE RAWSON stood in the middle of the street, the morning sun on his back giving him a long shadow. He was talking to Sam Bosworth, the banker here, when Les stepped out from the alley between Watkins' dry goods store and the Palace. Casually, Rawson threw him a glance, then froze. A deep flush crept up his neck onto his face and he pulled his eyes away, edging his back toward Les.

But Les had swung to his left, maybe anticipating Rawson's move. He was in front of him now, moving toward him with a loose stride, his thumbs hooked in the top of his shell belt. I was close enough to see his long, thin mouth stretch into a chill smile.

A dozen feet from Rawson he stopped, waiting. I could almost hear Rawson snap taut. Pleasantly, then, Les said, "I hear you've got Les Andrews locked up in your jail, Marshal."

After several seconds, Rawson found his

tongue. He tried to bluff it out. He growled, "Well, what about it?"

"Best let him out," Les said. "I'm Andrews."

I think Rawson knew that the minute he saw Les come out of the alley and I'll grant he hadn't figured out what he would do, so he said nothing. He only stared.

Les stood with legs wide apart, gently rocking on his high heels. His manner was like that of a rattlesnake stalking a quail. Blandly, he asked, "Want to lock me up, Marshal?" His eyes held Rawson's, and would not let them drop.

When Rawson kept his silence, Les' face clearly showed contempt. "Take off that badge," he commanded, "and now!"

Rawson, his face chalky and his big chest rising and falling with the scare in him, did not move.

"I said take it off, Marshal," Les repeated softly, "or didn't you hear me?"

Rawson nodded meekly. He had to use both hands to unpin the silverplated shield from his vest.

"Now drop it in the street."

The big man let the badge fall. His arms hung slack at his sides, and, if ever a man was beaten down, he was. His upper lip trembled, and was shiny with sweat.

The corners of Les' mouth curled and he said, "That's all, Ex-Marshal. Go hunt yourself a job."

Slowly, Les swung his back to Rawson and began to walk off. I saw Rawson's hand begin movement, then, as his courage worked inside him, suddenly clutch for his gun. I saw it clear the holster.

Les was a blur of movement and there was a single shot. Rawson dropped like a sack of grain, shuddered and was still. Les gave him a short, disinterested glance, then swung his eyes to me.

"He forgot I could see his shadow, Clem," he said, and shrugged.

For a moment, then, and for the first time I could remember, I was proud of my youngest brother. ***



THE PROSPECTOR

BY VIC SHAW

Reply by Victor Shaw:

Mr. Shaw is a well-known authority in the fields of mining and mineralogy, with nearly a half-century of practical prospecting behind him, and with numerous published works, as well as a lifetime service as consultant on pertinent matters to his credit.

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES is both pleased and proud to add him to its roster of regular contributors—and hopes the additional service Mr. Shaw enables us to perform for our readers will result in profit to all concerned—in funds, fun and health!

Mr. Shaw will answer all queries gratis—simply enclose a stamped, self-addressed return envelope with your letter. Address all queries to Vic Shaw, Lake Hughes, California : Star Rt.-2.

THAT THAR GOLD

Query: Please tell me how and where to find "that thar Gold." Also, where might I find some of the minerals you've mentioned in *15 WESTERN TALES*?

O.H.B., Apopka, Fla.

Where to find gold and "minerals," by which I assume you mean gemstones, covers far too much data for one letter like this. However, I'll explain high-points and also refer you to some of the excellent books on these subjects and, if I can be of further help, write to me again at the address given.

In general, as you must realize, commercial ores can only be found in special types of rock. For example: gold occurs chiefly in igneous rocks such as granite, andesite, and rhyolite, because these were brought to surface when molten from great depths. These rocks, when brought up in solution comprise various kinds of commercial ores and, in addition, silica that can be cooled into quartz. Other elements were also brought up in these volcanic fractures, such as much olivine which in time alters into serpentine. Now, serpentine happens to be the rock in which our platinum and chromite always occurs, so you've got to know what serpentine looks like to recognize it in the field. A vein of chromium ore, or platinum however, is usually worth more than gold.

Now, gold veins occur chiefly in the three igneous rocks just named above. When in granite rocks, it will be the grayish colored kind (*not* the red granite, colored by feldspar). But you will also find gold veins in certain rocks that were first silt, clay, sand,

(Continued on page 108)

DEATH OF THE

BY BRUCE CASSIDAY



Rory turned at the sound
of the heavy step, and
saw the hulking figure. . . .

WILD BULL

O'Rorke figured he had reason to be ashamed of the son he'd failed, and with true O'Rorke bull-headedness, he set out to beat a bit of decency into the kid—if it killed them both!

CLEATUS O'RORKE, the Wild Bull of the Brazos, slightly faded now, viewed the bleary-eyed, gray-headed man in the back bar mirror, and realized with shock that he was looking at his own reflection. He shook his head again, and the room reeled dangerously, dropped away from him, and then returned underfoot slowly. O'Rorke squinted into the distorted mirror, only to find the bar reflected there darkened and deserted. Filtering in under the bat-wing doors came a beam of bright morning sunlight.

God, thought O'Rorke, I passed out and stood here all night.

Then he remembered dragging himself in over a half acre of tin cans out back, pushing in through the back door, and blundering to the bar where he now stood, woozy, dead beat, and feeling his advanced age.

"Barkeep," he grunted, gesturing at his own reflection in the mirror, "Get that stinking saddle bum out of here, or I'll take my trade elsewhere!"

A footstep sounded behind O'Rorke, and a voice spoke near the Wild Bull's ear, in a soft, husky drawl. "Nothing would please me better, you sozzled up old rum-pot!"

O'Rorke wheeled dizzily, focusing vaguely on the bosomy, red-headed woman standing behind him, hands on hips, paint on lips, frown on face. "Maimie!" wheezed the Wild Bull, trying to fling his arms around the red-headed woman. "I'm back! It's me, the Wild Bull. Come to my arms, woman!"

Maimie thrust a strong hand onto the Wild Bull's chest, and pushed him back with a disdainful sniff. "Hold your breath or blow

it yonder, O'Rorke. I run a saloon, not a gut wagon."

O'Rorke sank his head into his hand, and leaned over on the bar, suddenly dizzy. "The shame of it, Maimie," he sighed. "It comes back to me now. The whole ungodly mess. The midnight madness, returned. Just like the old days. Maimie, what can you do with me?"

Maimie strode purposefully to a table in the middle of the deserted barroom and pulled O'Rorke along with her. "Sit down, O'Rorke, and take a load off your brains. You owe me a hundred and fifty dollars for the furniture you cracked up last night."

O'Rorke's lips quivered. "Oh God, so I do, Maimie." He sank into a chair, leaning forward on the table with the weight of his upper body. Under his twisted coat, his huge shoulder muscles bulged and strained. There had once been the strength of ten bulls in those broad back muscles, but that was all gone now. A shadow resembling his former majesty still clung to the Wild Bull's massive frame, but it was nine-tenths false front, like the store façades along the street outside.

"Maimie, Maimie," sighed O'Rorke, suddenly dead tired, "why didn't you clear me out of here last night? The morning sun caught me dead in the eye as I lay out back across a pile of tin cans, and nowhere for me to go but through the back door and up to the bar again. Thank God you've come."

Maimie Sloan ran a hand through her flaming red hair, and shook her head wearily. In her painted cheeks there had once been beauty and roundness, and in her eyes there

had been a fine spark of life and passion, but that was all washed out now, like chalk rubbed out with running water. Her full-blown figure had once held its curves without the aid of whale bone stays and corsets—but that time was long past. She was wealthy now, and hardened, and tired. Why did this man have to come back now after all these years—this tough, devil-may-care, hell-in-your-hat man—why did he have to come back with pain and defeat and shame in his eyes, and throw himself on her mercy? She had no power to help him.

Thinking these things chilled her to the bone. "You had your guts coming back here, O'Rorke," she whispered as a shiver ran through her. "I had hoped you was dead."

Instead of flinging his head up in fury, the Wild Bull sagged further forward onto the table, and breathed hard. "I had to Maimie—to find out." He looked up at Maimie's streaked face. "Then I'll go die."

"Find out?" echoed Maimie. "Find out what?"

"About Rory!" shouted the Wild Bull hoarsely. "About my son!"

"Find out what about him?" Maimie shouted back.

THE WILD BULL slapped the table fiercely with the flat of his hand. "Find out if he's still got that yellow streak ten miles wide running down his back. Find out if he's still afraid of guns, horses, and cattle. Find out if he's afraid of being a man."

Maimie's tired, green eyes studied the Wild Bull's lined, pouched, greying face. She felt the tremble of her own hand in her lap. She felt the surge of real fear climb along her flesh.

"Don't try to see him, O'Rorke," was the advice she offered.

O'Rorke drummed the table top with nervous fingers, stalling, sizing up his opponent, waiting for an opening. "Why not?" he demanded. "I'm his father! Who's got a better right to see him!"

"Sure. You're his father," Maimie said,

"He's known from the minute he was born that he was the Wild Bull's get—and don't think it hasn't shaped every minute of his life. Stay away, O'Rorke."

O'Rorke leaned forward, his bleary eyes suddenly full of blood and anger. "And why, Maimie? I've stayed away a-purpose too long—ever since he was ten years old—and yellower than a turnip root. He was a mamma's boy then. I want to see if he's changed—and if he hasn't—"

Maimie's voice was low. "He hates your guts," she said deliberately. "He'll kill you."

Stunned, O'Rorke sat a moment with unbelieving eyes, then threw back his head and laughed a long, glass-shaking, window-shattering laugh. It freed everything foul and stale inside him. When he sobered, there were tears in his eyes.

"Him—my yellow-striped get—kill me? He never had the guts to swat at a fly!"

Maimie, plucking at a free strand of hair, smoothed it back where it belonged before she said, "He's changed O'Rorke, so don't try to see him. You wouldn't recognize him."

O'Rorke waved his hand. "I'd know him in a darkened mine shaft eighty yards away. He's a spittin' image of me—with a bit of Jane in the build of his body."

Maimie shook her head. "He's as wide and tough as you are now, O'Rorke."

O'Rorke's eyes bulged—almost with secret pride. "He is?"

Maimie nodded. Her eyes were suspiciously bright. "He's got one of the biggest cattle outfits around the country, O'Rorke. He's got guts, and courage, and devil-may-care—everything you had in the old days. Like you say, he's your spittin' image—with only one thing lacking."

"And what's that?" O'Rorke demanded.

"He's got no heart," Maimie said.

Wild Bull stared in amazement. "Get of mine without a heart?" he choked. "A table-smashing, whiskey-drinking, hell-for-leather, fun-loving O'Rorke—without a heart? Glory be, you're daft, woman!"

Slowly, Maimie shook her head. "Clear out of town now," she warned. "Before you get your britches full of lead. I'm giving fair warning."

O'Rorke gaped with wonder. "And what kind of man is this proud son of mine?" he asked. "Is he married?"

Maimie looked resigned to his question. "There's nothing but ambition, drive and greed in him, O'Rorke. No cards, no drinking, no women. He's broken female hearts all over the county—by not giving a tumble to any girl; but he's absolutely got no heart."

O'Rorke was stunned. "An O'Rorke who doesn't curse and gamble and drink out of a bottle?" he cried. "Whatever in God's name made him this way, Maimie?"

Maimie shrugged. "And if your dad had been a saddle bum and a jail bird and a roustabout, wouldn't you be living him down, rooting him out of your heart? There's no cure for him, O'Rorke—like there was no cure for you?"

O'Rorke looked down at his hammy hands, at his chest, sweaty and grimy, at his huge body running now to fat and loose hide. "Oh yeah?" said the Wild Bull of the Brazos. "Maybe there's a cure that hasn't been tried."

Maimie's face went white. She tried to hide it, but she was frightened to death. "Don't approach him, O'Rorke. He's a madman, nursing a hatred of you that's been with him ever since you traded the Rocking O spread for a bottle of red-eye."

O'Rorke looked down at his calloused palms, and closed his fingers several times. "Maybe this is the way a saddle bum does die, Maimie—righting the wrongs he's responsible for. I thought the lad was yellow when he backed down from me." O'Rorke gave a wry chuckle. "And all the time he hated my guts!"

The fresh air braced him, and he jogged along on a pinto pony borrowed from Maimie. He remembered every inch of the road, for it headed out over the hills toward the Rocking O, the old O'Rorke spread. The trees, flowers, and hills he passed belonged to

O'Rorke, and always would, at least, in his memory. All around him was where he had lived out the best years of his life; the years with the first big herds, the years with Jane, the years that were spent growing stronger and bigger, the years before the death of Jane, and before the trouble hit him and booze had caused his downfall.

Topping the final rise, O'Rorke looked down the vale toward the old ranch house under the poplar trees—the popples, as Jane had always called them. Sweat came out on his face suddenly, and a smile quivered on his mouth, but fluttered away as his jaw slacked at what he saw.

The old ranch house and barn had multiplied into a small village. Out on the far rise were ten or twelve—O'Rorke counted slowly—more than fifteen separate buildings. Things were looking up. His hands trembled on the reins, and he knew he was glad to get back—gladder than he would ever have admitted to himself.

A RIDER came toward him along the road from the ranch, headed for town; tall, rawboned and sunburnt, and his eyes were as cold as glass. He nodded icily to O'Rorke, and turned immediately to continue along his way. A man of arrogance and pride, O'Rorke thought, as he studied the Rocking O brand on the rump of the mare.

He remembered someone had once mentioned to him that you could tell the quality of a general by the appearance of his lowest soldier. If the private bristled with military bearing and if he was as self-possessed as a king, it meant his general was a hard man to beat. If the private dressed sloppily and slouched in the saddle, his general was a third-rater. Looking at him, O'Rorke reflected that if the rider was any indication of the Rocking O, Rory had built up a spit-and-polish outfit of the highest caliber, and a cold-blooded one, too. He felt an imperceptible stir of uneasiness a-crawl in him. Maybe it was just as Maimie had said, the kid didn't have a heart after all.

O'Rorke removed his hat and wiped the sweat off his forehead and neck. The hang-over was almost melted out of him, but parts of it sloshed about inside, loath to leave him. O'Rorke heaved a sigh and touched spurs to the pony.

"O'Rorke!" someone called in back of him.

He turned clumsily in the saddle, to see a slender, beanpole of a man coming up rapidly behind him, big-hatted and loose-jointed in the saddle. When the scarecrow approached near enough to be identified, O'Rorke said, "Hawk." It was Hawk Allen, Jane's father, O'Rorke's father-in-law.

"I thought it was you, O'Rorke, when I seen you ambling across the humpback. Either that, or I was viewing a green-eyed monster!" Hawk Allen squinted through his off-eye at O'Rorke. The old man hadn't changed much in fifteen years, O'Rorke thought. God, he must be close to seventy now. "Well," drawled Hawk, "you ain't changed much—cepting you've went to pieces all of a sudden."

O'Rorke glared at Hawk Allen's thin, twisted face; the squinting, almost-closed bad eye that always looked at a man sideways; the seamed, leathery skin; the hooked, predatory nose; the grinning, toothless mouth. "Not as much as you have, Hawk," he grunted. "I was just coming back for a look-see. How come you're not over at the house?"

Hawk stared at O'Rorke, and then closed his squinting eye for a moment. "You been gone a long time. Things is echanged, O'Rorke. I ain't living at the Rocking O no more."

"Don't tell me," O'Rorke muttered. "That my whelp kicked you out?"

"Hell no!" Hawk exploded. "That damned grandson of mine wanted me to stay. I got out of there because—" he leaned forward and poked his long, withered finger at O'Rorke's chest—"the atmosphere of that place give me the creeps. Tell you, even the coyotes don't prowl there no more."

Turning his head, O'Rorke gazed off

across the rolling graze at the group of buildings comprising the Rocking O. "Seems to me," he said, "it's gettin' along without you, Hawk, gettin' along fine. Where you staying?"

Hawk grinned. "Line shack down by the L over L spread. Used to be my land. Figured I could spend my declining days down there." Hawk glanced at O'Rorke with a sly grin. "Come on along—it'd be a perfect place for you to cash in your chips, too. Looks like you're about ready to."

"No," said O'Rorke. "I'm going down to see Rory—and now."

Hawk's eyes widened. His off-eye squinted, and his eyebrow cocked up. "Don't, O'Rorke. I'll put a bullet in your gut two seconds after you've set foot on his land."

"My land, dammit!" snapped O'Rorke. "Everybody's forgotten I built that place up from nothing with my own bare hands!"

Hawk's mouth grunted disdainfully. "Yeah—and you throwed it away with them same two hands," he said. "Bucko, Lady Luck ain't one to smile twice on the same man. Friend, when you start going down the skids, you never come back."

O'Rorke shook his head, wonderingly. "What's happened to us? Fifteen years is a blamed long time to forget. Tell me where I failed my boy."

Hawk's thin shoulders lifted in a shrug. "All I know is that Jane did fine with him till she died. It was when you took over raising him, O'Rorke, that he went to pieces."

His past hung heavily on O'Rorke. He remembered his own tortured attempts to train the boy in the ways of the range, remembered the awkwardness of the boy and his own impatience with Rory's weak, bungling efforts at handling a gun, at bulldogging a steer, at riding a horse. He remembered, and sighed huskily. "I figured him for a mamma's boy, Hawk. I'll be frank. Maybe, I figured him wrong."

Hawk grunted. "He thought the world of you, O'Rorke—once. You were the biggest thing in the universe to him and the straight-

est, the fightingest hombre in the territory."

The big man nodded. "We never got together," he whispered. "And that was too bad. OK, how did we ever get into that spot? Why couldn't me and my whelp get through to each other?"

HAWK spat dryly, and cleared his throat. "There was some question as I remember as to what you was doing all them nights, drinking and busting furniture in Maimie Sloan's saloon. The boy was let down, O'Rorke."

O'Rorke bit his lip, lowered his eyes with shame. "What ever happened to me, Hawk? What gets into a man and eats in his craw and makes him do things like I did?"

"Hombres," said Hawk slowly, "is the damndest people."

O'Rorke lifted his eyes to the group of buildings. "God, how he must hate my guts." He fell silent for a moment and then lifted the reins. "I've got to have it out with him, man to man, Hawk. There's things only he and I can come to a decision on. Some problems require brains and soft talk, but others require muscle and bone."

Hawk picked absently at his chin. "I wouldn't go on down there if I was you, O'Rorke. That boy is as cold-blooded as they come. He'd laugh whilst putting a slug between your eyes."

O'Rorke thought a moment. "I've felt it that way. Everything's bottled up inside him. He's built a corral around himself, and shut everybody else out. I hear he ain't even interested in whiskey, or playing faro, or courting a pretty girl. He needs to be let out of the cage he's built for himself."

Hawk laughed hollowly. "And you're the man to open the cage."

"Yeah, I'm the man." O'Rorke stared off across the rolling prairie. "For God's sake, Hawk—what ever happened?"

Hawk shrugged, and turned away from O'Rorke. "God only knows," he said, and touched spur to his horse.

Rory saw his father as soon as O'Rorke

mounted the steps to the veranda. He had been sitting in a cowhide chair, leafing through the tally book, studying the reports of his top hand, but had turned at the sound of the heavy, somehow familiar step, and he spotted the hulking, bent-over figure coming toward him. He had instantly recognized the grizzled, aged figure and though, the shock of seeing his father had caught him off guard, he knew exactly what to do.

He came to his feet, balanced like a bobcat rocked back on its hind legs, his arms bent, his shoulders forward, his weight on the balls of his feet. He stared a full moment before he reached for the gun slung low around his waist. He took it out in one swift, greased motion, and brought it up lined square on the Wild Bull's guts. He squeezed on the trigger.

Maimie had been right, O'Rorke decided, as he gazed at the magnificent build of his boy. Rory had filled out, had taken on grace and weight and ease. O'Rorke knew Rory looked very much the way he had himself in the early days. Rory's face was clean cut and handsome, and his hair was wavy brown, much as O'Rorke's had been. His eyes were blue, the color of the Western sky at high noon. He was everything O'Rorke had once been. Everything—with one thing lacking, a heart.

Rory's expression was as cold as ice. His lips locked flat. His eyes were frozen and there were no laugh wrinkles at their sides. "God sakes," he said lazily, slipping the gun back in his gunbelt, unfired. "Look what the coyotes drug in." He wiped his hand on his pants. "I would of shot you dead, but I see you ain't heeled."

O'Rorke sighed. "You're all they tell me, Rory—and more." He rubbed his worn cheek with a slab-like hand. "It's a nice spread," he said. "You built it up right proper."

Rory's face remained expressionless. "Get off this land," he said. "A rope's waiting for you if you don't, O'Rorke."

O'Rorke sighed and nodded. "So it's O'Rorke, now," he said. "Not 'Pa' or 'Dad.'"

The younger generation has gone to the dogs, for certain."

Rory's clear blue eyes drilled into O'Rorke's. "What the hell do you think the older generation's done?" he cried.

There was wisdom in that, and suddenly, the older man smiled. "But we went to pot the fine way, Rory. Not with sneers, wise remarks, and cold fishy eyes—but with laughter, fists smacking bodies, and the glorious sound of breaking whiskey bottles. We did it the way the kings did it, Rory! Not sitting on the veranda reading a sheaf of tally sheets!"

HIS spit-out words rang in the still air like a challenge. Rory's mouth dropped open, and his eyes blazed coldly at the Wild Bull. The breath rushed through his nostrils, and the thick cord at his neck stood out. He dropped into that crouch again, and stood eyeing his father across the expanse between them.

"Wine, women, and song," snarled Rory O'Rorke. "That was your way, wasn't it, O'Rorke? Cheap booze, cheap women like Maimie Sloan, and the song of poker chips, faro cards, and the wheel of fortune! Who the hell are you to talk about the younger generation? You had everything there was in the world—and you threw it away!" Rory's words were high-pitched and laced with sobs—ugly, angry sobs that came bursting up from the depths of his being like peals of thunder. "You threw it away."

O'Rorke moved forward, wary, balanced, waiting. His eyes were narrowed, and a fire of excitement smoldered there. He said, softly, "You hated my guts so much, son, why didn't you try to forget me? Why'd you try to keep your hate alive?"

Rory laughed a flat, short laugh. "I built up everything you'd thrown away, O'Rorke. You call that hatred? I raised this place from shambles to the biggest spread in the country! In spite of you, O'Rorke! In spite of the people who said because I had your blood in my veins I'd be a saddle bum too."

O'Rorke's grin was hideous now, his eyes glassy. "You built a range on hatred, Rory! Everything you've done in your life has been aimed at me—everything you've built you've built to spite the memory of me! And it's kept you dead inside, Rory, a heartless, cold-blooded corpse!" O'Rorke's voice hushed to a whisper. "I'm here in person, Rory. Take it out on me, why don't you? Or are you scared to?"

Rory reached the gun out again and held it in his hand, aimed at his father's heart. He flipped the chamber around, and smiled icily. "You never thought I could use this, did you, O'Rorke?" Rory laughed dangerously. "The horses—you never did think I'd get the hang of them, did you, O'Rorke? Or busting steers. I was a failure at everything, wasn't I?" Rory's eyes blazed. "You never gave me a chance to learn! And then you sneered and turned away from me when I failed!"

O'Rorke's shoulders sagged. With difficulty he braced himself and stood his ground, waiting for the attack. "You were yellow, Rory. You're still yellow!"

Rory's smile was back, showing his teeth, showing his raw, naked hate. "I'll show you who's yellow," he said.

Rory raised the six-shooter and fired. The slug hit O'Rorke's hat in dead center, and jammed it tight against his scalp. Sweat broke out on O'Rorke's face as Rory fired again and another slug speared through the Stetson. A third shot took the hat off from O'Rorke's head and sent it sailing across the veranda. Sweat poured off O'Rorke's body. Sun beat down on his glistening, shining head. The untanned crown above his hat line shone starkly white.

Rory lowered the sights of the gun and casually pulled the trigger once again. A slug plowed through the seam of O'Rorke's wrinkled coat, sending white stuffing flying. Rory laughed—a wild, inhuman laugh escaping from him.

O'Rorke licked his lips. Suddenly he wanted a drink more than he had ever wanted

anything in his life. God, he wanted a drink more than life itself. If he didn't get it, he would fall flat on the porch slats.

"You learnt good, son," O'Rorke said.

Rory holstered the gun easily. "Merely wanted to show you that your early training wasn't water down the drain."

"I'm not bad with a steer, either, and I'm hell on a horse."

O'Rorke had a hard time speaking. "Rory," he said. "What you getting at?"

Rory smiled coldly. "You desecrate the land my mother once lived on. Get off the Rocking O, O'Rorke."

O'Rorke moved forward, his hands trembling, his head spinning, as he spoke. "No," he said. "I came back to pound some sense into you, Rory. I've been hearing about you and the way you've spread out like a cattle king. I've been hearing nobody likes it, because you're riding roughshod over the country. You're a cold-blooded operator, and that's not right for an O'Rorke."

Rory smiled bitterly. "I learned it from you, O'Rorke," he said. "You got everything you went after—and then threw it away. Me, I get everything I go after—and I keep it. That's what makes me the cattle king, and you the range bum!"

O'Rorke looked down at his hands. He rubbed them together, tentatively. "I'm coming at you, Rory. If talking won't turn the trick, muscle and bone will." O'Rorke grinned. "My old man taught me that, Rory. I should have tried it on you years ago."

Rory raised an eyebrow. "I'll put a lead slug in you if you touch me."

O'Rorke shrugged. "If that's the way you want it." He moved closer to Rory. Rory stood stiffly, his face frozen, his eyes watchful, puzzled. Was this hulk of a man actually idiot enough to tackle a man twenty-five years younger?

O'RORKE'S doubled fist struck out for Rory's stomach. His left followed quickly, and then his right smashed for Rory's heart. With a surprised start, Rory backed off, took two of the blows, and side-stepped the third. He threw himself against the wall of the house, his eyes amazed. "Dad!" he cried out in surprise.

The word cut into O'Rorke's consciousness like a hot slug, but he shook off the weak feeling it gave him. He circled, waiting for Rory to move at him. The boy stood stubbornly by the wall of the house and watched, his eyes dumbfounded.

O'Rorke charged in this time, throwing punches, grabbing for Rory's arm to lift him and hurl him to the floor. Rory moved away, but O'Rorke caught him. O'Rorke tried to lift him, but Rory's weight was much too great for O'Rorke's weakened, enervated back muscles. Cursing, sobbing, sweating, O'Rorke twisted away, and ran in again, pounding heavily at Rory's midriff.

Rory staggered back, surprised at the furious attack. One of O'Rorke's blows touched his face and brought blood spurt- ing from his mouth. The taste of the blood, salty and hot, ran through the boy and, swearing, he backed off, fists cocked and his cold eyes watchful.

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O'Rorke charged again, heedless of defense. Rory jabbed at his chest, his stomach, his head. Rory's arms drove like piston rods at O'Rorke's hulk, moving him back swiftly across the veranda. With a crash, O'Rorke hit the porch rail, bounced off, lashed out swinging from the floor. Driving him off, Rory hammered O'Rorke back by the sheer weight of his fists. Then the older man's hulk banged against the porch railing, and with a splintering crash, smashed against the uprights and dropped to the ground below.

Rising, O'Rorke lunged out at Rory above him, and together, they plummeted to the ground, bounced over and rolled several yards, locked in each other's arms. Rory pounded at O'Rorke who, winded and knowing he was finished, doggedly fought back, blow for blow.

After a while, O'Rorke managed to slide out from under Rory, and again charged in, throwing punches at the boy's chest, heart, and face. A left hook landed on Rory's jaw, and he staggered back. He weaved around unsteadily, as he wiped the blood off his face. His eyes narrowed down and all the hate in him welled up into them then. With a mad bellow, young Rory O'Rorke charged the tired Wild Bull of the Brazos, and drove him back across the clearing toward the stable in a mad effort to pound the life from him. Battered into insensibility, O'Rorke smashed against the wall of the stable, bounced off, and fell forward with a crash to the ground.

As he stood triumphant, a strange emotion welled up in Rory O'Rorke. Not hate, not ambition, not contempt. Something warm, enveloping, devastating. Something he had never known before. A cry wrenched out of his throat. His head throbbed with the blood pounding through it. A hot, vital feeling swept over him, and salty tears rose in his eyes. His throat tore apart, breath charged into his lungs in racking gulps. Sobs came from him as they never had before as his emotions rushed out of him.

"Dad!" he screamed. "My God—Dad!"

He ran over to the inert body slumped down by the stable wall, the sobs clearly coming out of him now, the tears streaming down his sweaty, bloody face. "Are you all right?"

Rory tenderly lifted the broken, heavy body, and propped it against the wall. His hat had fallen off on the veranda, and the boy ran for it, skimmed it under the water of the trough by the stable, and dashed the water into O'Rorke's face. The Wild Bull's eyes fluttered.

"Dad!" cried Rory. "Are you all right? Can you get up?"

The Wild Bull shook his head briefly, and then groaned, holding his head in his hand. Rory leaned over, pulling his father to his feet. He was still sobbing, the tears still coursing down his cheeks. "Dad, you damned fool! You lovable, damned, old fool!"

He put his arms around the old man's shoulders, and led him across the clearing to the veranda. Halfway there, O'Rorke shoved himself free. "Rory! Get your hands off me. Are you so daft you think I can't walk anymore?"

Rory shook his head in wonder. "You knew you couldn't beat me up. Why'd you try it?"

O'Rorke rubbed his sweaty, bloody face and looked blank for a minute. Then he said, "You called me 'Dad' a minute ago, didn't you, son?"

Rory scowled. "Mebbe I did—so what?" O'Rorke smiled gingerly. "Hombres, to borrow a phrase from Hawk Allen, is the damndest people. Lots of folks get to know each other by chewing the fat, man to man. Others got to ride the river together, bust steers together, rope horses together to know each other. Now, essentially," O'Rorke grinned, "the O'Rorkes are fighting men. Mebbe that's the way they get close—beating the stuffing out of each other."

Laughter floated out from the veranda—and the sound of it was so loud and so strange, that a couple of the Rocking O hands came a-running to see if something wasn't the matter. * * *

WILDERNESS TRAP

By DANE GREGORY

Naked down to his belt-line, Bender caught up the rifle. . . .



Held together by bonds of hatred and fear, both Bender and the Kid swore that only one of them would leave the cabin alive. . . .

HE STOOD with his back to the lamp-light so that the shadow of his lifted arm fell across the Kid's white face. It was a long arm ending in a thick growth of hand, the fingers spread slightly to fit the crooked pattern where the Kid's face was no longer white.

"I'd hate like hell," said Bender, "to be the kind of man that can't take a joke."

His slap had swung the Kid across a tangle of Victor No. Three's and into the south wall of the cabin, imaginatively weather-stripped by some former tenant with colored excerpts from Boyce's *Saturday Blade*.

The Kid's eyes sidled to a gaudy dinner party scene at which the hostess was announcing pompously, "I will now kill Hattie." That may have given him the idea.

He had broken at last, Bender saw. He had tried to control himself, but the Kid had finally broken. Slowly but surely, cracked. Bender was well-satisfied. The Kid was still shaken a little with nausea, and that was fine. That simple physical process had completed what days, weeks, more than a month of Bender's studied malice had begun.

"I'm going to kill you," the Kid repeated.

"Ah," said Bender. "Would you now? Would you?"

The issue had been between them from the first, though only Bender had known that when they came up into the high country together.

It was virgin timber land freed temporarily from restrictions because of the wolves that ran there in avid gray packs, a constant threat to the sheep and cattle below. It had been good hunting. The wolves could be had almost for the taking. Never quite rational, they went wholly mad when the pungence of Bender's lure spread on the forest. For the rest, it was a land of living gold—mink, marten, and less than a rifle shot from the cabin, a coulee city of beaver working overtime shifts.

Any seasoned trapper could have grown mildly rich on the bounty money alone. The peltries were pure cream. They would have to be diverted quietly into the black market, but, with any luck at all, Bender stood to take a fortune in illicit furs out of this lush strip before the government closed in.

Without the Kid, that was to say. Objective as always, Bender saw the Kid as a chance obstacle that would have to be removed as his unwelcome partners had been removed in the past—by a campaign of systematic sadism that eventually would send him kiting back to civilization.

He was quite impersonal about this. He

neither liked nor disliked the Kid, whose three-hundred-dollar grubstake had been necessary to him after certain passages with a sleek blonde otter of a woman in Seattle.

"Ah," said Bender. "So you're going to kill me, are you? It's as simple as that. He's going to kill me."

"I've had enough of it!" wept the Kid. "Gypsum water in my coffee, horsehair in my tobacco, a mustache on my girl's picture—why, damn you, Bender, I should have killed you then and—"

"There," said Bender.

He had swung his hand again. The Kid's heel caught in the webbed trap chains and he went floundering to the floor.

"Me and Hattie," said Bender. "We'd just as soon be killed for a sheep as a lamb. Wouldn't we, Hattie old girl? Well, how about it, Kid, still think you've got a good murder in you?"

"Yes," said the Kid.

Bender turned back into the circle of lamplight. They had been hard at work when the Kid's malaise claimed him, and a newly-drawn wolf pelt lay wet and glistening across the spruce table. Bender picked up the knife beside it and tossed it to the floor, saying, "I hate a man that talks and talks, and never does anything."

THE KID lay belly-flat on the floor and peered at the slowly revolving knife from blood-shot eyes. Bender saw the great conflict in him—the will to destroy opposed by the instincts of heritage. At a rough guess, it would be no more than a day or so before the older instinct took full command.

Bender said experimentally, "I thought it would be that way. I never saw a crying man that wasn't yellow as a carp's bay window when it came to the test."

The Kid reached for the knife and rose up on his haunches all of a piece.

Bender's laugh was like torn flannel. He had gauged the distance perfectly and now

he swung the green pelt in a hard, cross-wise cut that laid the wet shank solidly against the Kid's eyes.

The fallen knife twirled like a wheel of fortune.

Bender stood over the blinded Kid and said softly, "I wish you'd go back to that girl with the mustache, son. Anybody could see at a glance you and her would make a cute couple."

"I'm going to get you, Bender," said the Kid.

"Right now," said Bender, "you're going to bed. You know, Kid, sometimes I don't see much of a future around here for you."

They slept in bunks on opposite sides of the room, sharing a crude intimacy neither of them liked. Bender lay log-still in his bunk and made a great to-do with his breathing, but his open eyes smiled into the firelight. He waited.

The coals shuddered down to a violet sludge, and away out in the timbers, a wolf-song broke in bitter flakes of sound. It was a haunted cry, hopeless with yearning. That one would be in a Victor before sun-up, thought Bender.

He still waited.

The Kid's Rockford-clad feet swung softly to the floor and his set teeth shone in the dark.

He listened carefully to Bender's thick breathing. He took two steps toward the fallen knife.

Bender's eyes still smiled. Under the gunnysack that cushioned the knife was a jump-trap set on a hairline edge so that it would take the kid somewhere above the wrist. It was a trap built for heavier game than the Kid. It had teeth.

The Kid came to a stop.

His Rockfords shifted indecisively—this way, that way—and Bender heard a pulled finger creak at the knuckle-joint. He almost respected the Kid at that moment, not in any personal sense but as he would have respected a canny old coyote swinging wide of the bait.

The Kid lay down in his bunk again and Bender lost any sign of respect for him. It had not been caution, after all; it had been a triumph of heritage over hate.

"God!" the Kid mumbled into his blanket. He wept again, the fingers of one hand sliding across the floor.

At sunrise the trees were white with a powdery snow that fluffed out like a girl's hair, light and vivacious, at every turn of the wind. Bender spread the burlap curtains and swore through his teeth.

"Wind on top of a powder snow. That does the thing up brown."

The Kid said with eager wit, "Up white, you mean, don't you? Ain't much of a wind, though, is it?"

"A Stick Indian could have blown on his knuckles and it would have been wind enough to foul every wet in the line." Bender hiked up his mackinaw collar and cached a new vial of scent in one pocket. "I'm taking the Springfield along today. The Winchester'll be up there in the rack if some pesky traveling salesman drops around to sell you a safety razor for your girl friend."

The Kid whitened, then said, "How come I ain't going along?"

"After what's happened, maybe I'd hate to get between you and the sun," Bender said.

The Kid clenched his fists. "If you wouldn't ride me, Bender, it would be fine. But you ride me, all the time you—"

Bender turned slowly, the heavy Springfield slung through the crotch of his arm. "Or maybe," he said, "I'd hate to have you get between me and the sun. After all, Kid, your back hair parts in the middle just like mine."

He kept his eyes on the Kid's drawn face. "But you never looked at it that way, did you? You're like the old blister up there in the picture—it don't occur to her that maybe Hattie is quite a fireball in her own right."

"Lots of people know I came up here with you, Bender."

"Let's neither one of us worry about that part of it. If something happened to me, or—well, let's say to you—I don't think there'd be any trouble with the sheriff. Ask me why?"

The Kid looked down at a ringlet of bacon rind on his plate.

"Why?"

"Wolves," said Bender.

The bacon rind crumbled under a tentative forefinger.

Bender said, "Men have disappeared up here before. One of them was the government trapper that threw up this very hutch. See what I mean, Kid? Nobody asked very many questions, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if that's how it turns out again."

"Again?" shrilled the Kid.

"If anything," Bender told him, "Happens to me."

He put one hand to the crosspiece of the door. Turning as if in afterthought, he let the Springfield draw a casual figure on the Kid's shirt front. The Kid shrank like a partridge.

Bender added gently, "Or to you."

CLOSE on mid-day, he brought up at last to the dull arc of blood. The snowfly had come with early dawn, crossing his sets so that the bottle of lure had had to be uncorked a dozen times along the way. But there had been, he remembered, a wolf that wept before dawn.

The wolf lay now and looked up at Bender out of eyes too sickened to care. His forepaw hung by a worn tendon. He was far gone.

"Ah," said Bender. "Would you, now? Would you?" He circled the wolf and set his sights for an ear-to-ear shot that would leave the thick pelt undamaged.

The Springfield had a heavier rebound than the Kid's Winchester—a long one like a snake striking from the grass. Used to the light rifle for close-in work, he had forgotten to harden his heels when he shot. The butt-plate caught him high in the chest,

and wolf and man dropped as though one.

Bender cut one hand across his muddy flanks and decided that he would, as a matter of policy, bat the Kid's ears down to-night. Let the Kid go back for the carcass—do him good.

He left the dead wolf slung across the trap and walked in his own footprints up through the aisled timbers.

The forest steamed now, fragrant with thaw. The wind's soft fingers wove a lace of unrest on the air. So absorbed in the effect that he did not look for the cause—though it was all around him then, in the tissue of his garments and in the pores of his skin—Bender knew a hate of the forest as sudden and devouring as his hunger of cities. On Yesler Way at this moment, he thought, there were girls who walked in the rain.

He was one with the wolves, though he did not know it. He had been one with them from the moment that he and the trapped wolf had fallen together.

Now they came out of the underbrush behind him, the wolves whose unrest he shared—and he saw them.

There might have been a baker's dozen or more of them in the salmonberry growth downslope. With the steel wool of February in their ruffs, it should have been an easy matter to tell; but it was never easy. They had a trick of lengthening their muscles to fit the leanest shadow.

He was not afraid. In times of natural meat rationing a timber wolf could be as voracious as anything on four legs or two, but nature issued no ration cards in this fat land. And the wolves, Bender saw, were moved by some impulse less convincing than hunger.

The Springfield knocked at his ribs. He drew a fine comb of lead through the brushes below him, letting his body swing with the rifle until his opposite haunch sat on the opposite heel. Once and no more a thicket burst with movement. That was the harvest of the enfilade—a dead or wounded wolf.

Bender's hand went back to his mackinaw pocket and it came out empty as the breech of the Springfield. Bender damned the wolves and himself.

He had learned long ago that a woodsman sketchily girt for his day invites the cruelest ironies of nature. But who was to say he had been sketchily girt? A double handful of Springfield cartridges should have scattered the pack to the last outpost of hell. There was no precedent in his experience for the conduct of these particular wolves.

They had come out of the thickets already, and they were following him again. Bender struck off the trail at a sharp tangent. He drove the rifle stock into a patch of chert rubble and set it raining down on them.

"Beat it!" he told them. "Now beat it, damn you!"

One of the wolves in the vanguard showed teeth cleaner than any hound's. As if at a signal, the pack formation tightened. It was an arrow now, drawn and aimed. Bender knew fear at last.

For wolves would not always resolve themselves into precise chemical formulae. In quantities too great for their blood to endure, the same excitant that drew them to a trap had been known to set them on the trapper himself—killers appeasing one instinct in the hysteria of another. Or so he had heard.

Then Bender's fingers had found the sticky, wet stain across his flannel shirt front. A full half hour he had been live bait, steeped in the essences of the broken vial. The wind was blowing, and the wolves were mad, and there was no more cartridges for the Springfield.

BENDER had known fear only as a craftsman knows one of his tools. Now that the tool had turned in his hand, he had no talent for the other end of it. It cut across the nerve center that governs instinct as well as reason.

Bender whooped his panic and set at a hard up-trail run.

The wolves understood him well. They had not been quite certain the moment before. Now they were certain, and they came steadily toward him.

The cabin was lost in folds of distance, four miles to the south, over broken country where even the timbers lurched and grappled for footing. He could not make it. He was about to die. Bender saw that at last and accepted it almost with courage.

He used the Springfield as a crutch and swung about face at the first solid hold for his heels. He had shed his mackinaw along the way. Now he made a ball of it and threw it hard down the wind.

The old wolf shook his wintry flews and gave it wide clearance, not to be diverted by any new vagary of the senses. The senses overwhelmed the wolf. He sharpened his muzzle at a crossing of the winds and cocked his head sideways to covet the reeking bait.

The wolf crept warily toward the mackinaw. He raised his lip in a curved quizzical smile and salaamed to it. He toppled suddenly across it and began to roll.

Bender let hope and folly drive through him together. He ran again. Two of the young wolves veered into the timbers and paced him jovially, though Bender did not know that until he stopped to ease the thin pain in his lungs. They were below him then, laughing up at Bender.

Their eyes shone lambent in the shadows of the spruce.

"No!" said Bender.

Bender screamed, "*No!*" again.

He had time only to shrug out of his shirt and uppers. The gust accepted them from Bender's fingers and spread them enticingly before the wolves.

Naked down to his belt-line, Bender caught up the rifle and went on. He did not run again. He was infinitely careful not to do so, holding his muscles to a stroller's gait that exhausted him more than headlong flight would have done.

THERE is always the wolf that runs alone. His way is that of the pack by preference, but only so long as it conforms with the way of the individual.

He came out of the timber ahead of Bender. They met face to face on the downhill jog.

He was an old wolf with the tempers, but not the infirmities, of age. He was fully mature and a quarter in length. His muscles coiled with conscious power under his thirty-dollar pelt. He sneered at the half-naked man with the empty gun.

In this sneer was the whole history of his dislike for this man, conceived at first sight and growing with the leaps and bounds that had borne him up-country to head Bender off exactly where it would hurt the most.

The wolf wove sideways and came in low. He struck so suddenly that the man had no time for despair.

Bender swung the Springfield straight and hard, driving with the butt-end of it. The mattress of leaf-mold resounded dully. He had thought that the wolf would try for his bared throat, but the strike was at mid-thigh.

The wolf worked his fangs into Bender's left leg and braced his hindquarters, pulling. He was like a spiked jump-trap that whips its prey backward with the tension of the chain.

Bender put the gunstock to the wolf in a blow that loosened the wolf's teeth and his own. He had aimed it for the flat wedge of skull. It caught the wolf amidships and bent his ribs inward so that two of them were grating when he rose, but he did not whimper.

Bender whimpered. "I'll kill you!" he shouted.

The wolf's eyes understood and doubted. Tight over the man's thigh was a hand that was red with lost strength. The man would need strength as badly as he would need two hands for the rifle.

Bender held the rifle in his two sweaty hands. He plied it as bar and balance-bar—

a totem against the wolf before him and the suck of gravity behind. The country took an easier fall here, swooning gracefully into its pillows of mist. But the cabin was drawn into deeper mists.

The wolf made no effort to protest against his hurt. The two broken ribs moved under his pelt, and once he turned his sharp nose into them and probed as with a scalpel. But the glance he bent on the man was clinical and sure.

It went from the man to the trail of blood that wound from the man, a graph of sinking endurance as legible to the wolf as to Bender.

"Kill you!" Bender told him. "Kill you!" But he didn't believe that he would.

He hugged the Springfield to his damp chest and found a stone with his freed hand. He had the best of luck with it. It bounded from the wolf's broken ribs.

The wolf settled himself down in the thicket and put his muzzle between his paws. Agony burned with a candid green light in his eyes.

"Ah," said Bender. "Would you, now? Would you?"

He ran again, thumping the gunstock into the slope and letting his body roll when roll it must.

Half a mile downgrade, the wolf came out of the spinney to his left and looked sagely at the thickened stain underfoot. The wolf's ribs were poulticed with mud. He had time even for that.

The wolf smiled at the man—the man howled at the wolf. . . .

MAN and wolf came to a point in the trail where live rock flumed the course of a long-dead stream. The wolf struck again here, weaving and feinting like a boxer.

Bender swung his weapon. His hands were wet on the rifle barrel and then, impossibly, the Springfield drove its stock into a tree! The wolf and the man looked at the man's open hands.

Bender threw out his arms and went backward into the coulee.

The wolf caught at him as he fell, wanting to hold him there. The wolf's teeth shut on the rawhide lace of Bender's left boot, and the life of the rawhide measured strange war between wolf and coulee. Bender swung head downward, to be hurt by one or the other.

The wolf gave him to the coulee, and the coulee rolled him and romped him and spread him face down in a cradle lined with stone.

Through his filmed eyes, Bender saw the carnelian among the stones, worn to a dusky gloss by the waters of yesterday. It had all the fire and beauty of life in its veins. His veins were emptying of life.

He drove his great new vigor into his hands and watched them go forward and flatten on the gravel bed. The gravel had moved only a little. The man moved not at all.

The hands lay dead and empty, obeying the will no more. And the wolf had come down into the coulee to reclaim the man. . . .

The Kid's outcry was a soundless yawn back of the rifle barrel. The rifle caught a point of light that ran toward the Kid's narrowed eyes with every spank of a cartridge.

Bender and the wolf looked up at him in unison and in wonder.

The Kid crouched yonder side of the coulee, his Winchester laid in the deep V where two boulders put their heads together to fashion a natural rifle pit.

Less than a quarter mile to southward, the starving fire raised a question-mark of smoke. The Kid's nose wept. Patiently, he had waited long in ambush, his rifle set for Bender or for the rancid, old bear he had been assured a .22 cartridge would stop.

Most likely, he had waited for Bender. Around the Kid's left arm was a thick, red bandage that turned Bender's thought to the wolf-size knife he had left behind him over the pan of the jump-trap.

And, in the last analysis, the bruised and bloody Kid could not seem to kill the man. He was shooting at the old wolf for all he was worth, and at that range no one could have missed.

The wolf went up to the unresisting man and took him carefully by the throat. His instincts may have told him what the man's brain knew—that there was no powder in the Kid's cartridges. ★ ★ ★



THE HIGH-IRON KILLER!

By John Jakes

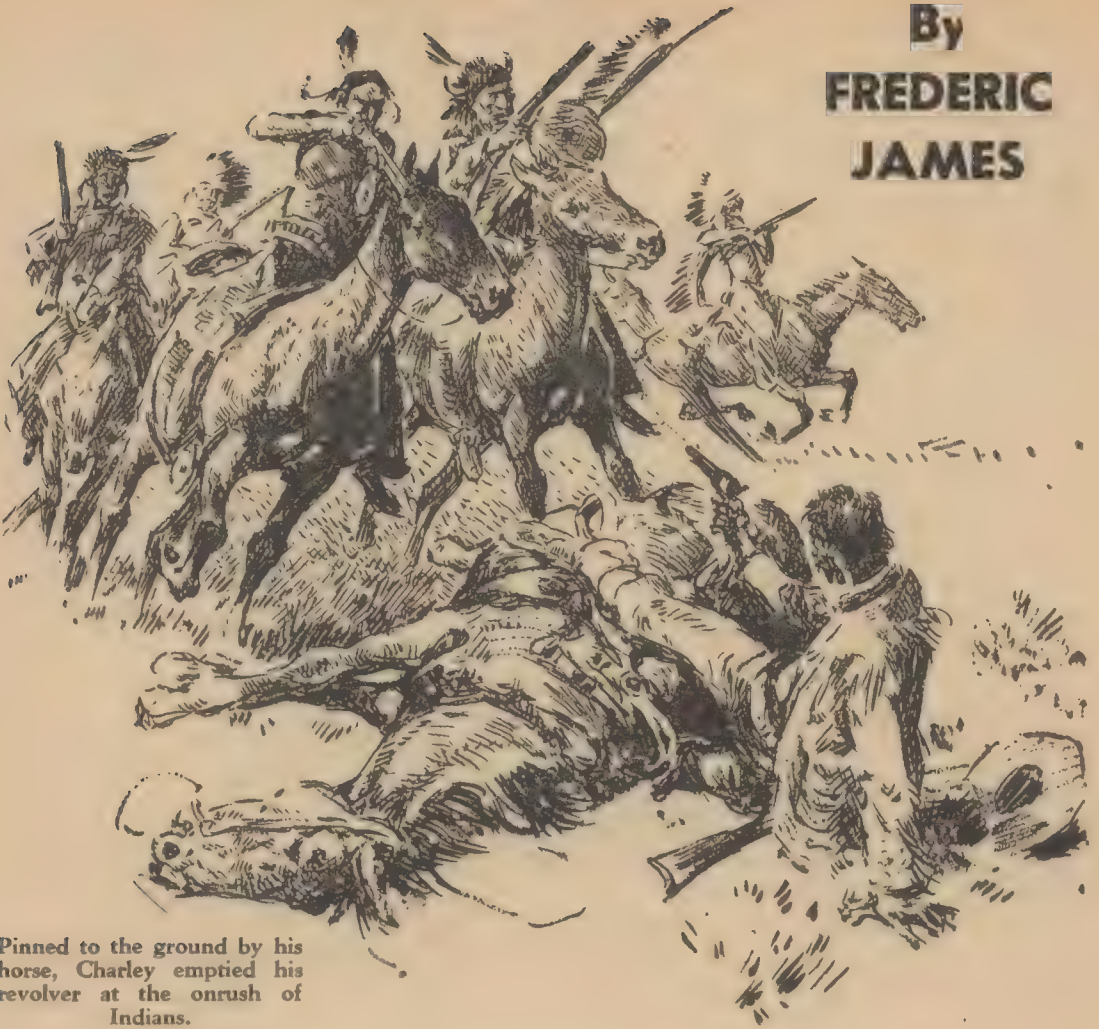
As top trouble-shooter for the K. & W. Railroad, Mark Rome's risky job was blazing the trail for the Westering iron. And God help the crew—either friends or enemies—who tried to stop him!

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25c **BIG-BOOK** 
WESTERN

By
**FREDERIC
JAMES**



Pinned to the ground by his horse, Charley emptied his revolver at the onrush of Indians.

*Only one man who rode with the ill-fated Seventh Cavalry, foresaw
the bitter outcome on the Little Big Horn. . . .*

THE MAN WHO WARNED CUSTER

(Fact Story)

DURING the summer of 1870, a young man about twenty-four years of age, carrying a Sharps' .44 caliber rifle over his shoulder and leading a pack pony, turned up in Dakota Territory. Nobody paid him much attention. The frontier was fairly crawling with men who, like him, wanted to carve their notch in the new land.

But Charley Reynolds was not concerned that no welcoming committee came out to meet him. He made no boasts. Though he had roamed over the wildest parts of the west since he was sixteen and knew the land and its ways like a book, he was silent. Nor did

he tell anyone about his three years' service as a scout with the Sixteenth Kansas Regiment during the Civil War. Dakota could find out these things for itself—and it did! For, before long, Charley's exploits were on the tongue of every resident in the territory—Indian and white alike.

"Lonesome Charley," as he became known, was a hunter such as even the Indians had never seen. The whites called his hunting "Reynolds' luck" and the Indians named him "White Hunter That Never Goes Out For Nothing."

In 1874, Charley's skill nearly cost him his life. He went hunting along the Little Missouri, not far from Fort Berthold, and, in an area where the best Indian hunters had found little or no game, came upon eight elk. Methodically, Charley shot the entire band which made the Gros Ventres, who claimed this area, extremely jealous when they learned of the big kill. To make matters worse, a half-breed named Buchamp, who had accompanied Charley, told the Indians that Charley had only to sprinkle the contents of a mysterious potion he carried in a black bottle on the ground and have elk come to him.

Boiling with rage, the superstitious Gros Ventres immediately surrounded Charley's camp and demanded that he give up the potion. When Charley denied its existence, the Indians became abusive. Forced to retreat from them at gun point, Charley managed to escape, followed by eight persistent Gros Ventres, at a great distance. However, when the Indians began to pick up "signs" of the dreaded Sioux, they abruptly abandoned their pursuit.

In the spring of 1876, Lonesome Charley was engaged by General George Armstrong Custer, to serve as guide for the General's projected strike against the Sioux. Custer assured Reynolds that there was little probability that the Sioux would offer much resistance. The veteran scout's opinion differed. He predicted that they would fight, and fight hard. He had noticed the Indians making extensive preparations, and had pre-

viously cautioned his commander that they were equipped with the best Winchester rifles. In fact, rather than expecting an easy victory, Charley prophetically envisioned a major battle.

Custer rashly ignored his scout's warning. He pushed ahead with his plans, and on the 25th of June, his Seventh Cavalry finally joined battle with the Sioux at a place called the Little Big Horn, in the present state of Montana. Charley was with General Reno, at Custer's rear, in a supporting position, and he could do little to help. Sensing tragedy ahead, and a trap, Reno fell back on the Little Big Horn River, taking up a position of protection in the wooded area along that stream.

Building up slowly, the battle mounted in its fury, until it hit catastrophic proportions. Of the three doctors with Reno, two were killed. Doctor Porter, the only remaining man who could lend assistance to the wounded, seemed unaware of the danger. In his linen duster, he was a conspicuous target as he ministered to the wounded and dying. Unmindful of his own safety, Charley shouted a hurried warning to the doctor and rode back into the fray.

That warning was his last known utterance. A few moments later his horse went down, pinning the scout to the ground. Fighting to the last, Charley emptied his revolver at the onrush of Indians.

When General Terry regained the battleground a few days later, his men found Lonesome Charley's twisted, headless corpse. He was buried with full military honors, along with the men who had fallen with him, in a soldier's grave.

But this was not to be his final resting place. Soon afterwards, a professor, who had come to know Charley on an expedition to the Black Hills early in the scout's career, had his bones removed to Ann Arbor, Michigan. The educator, who is believed to have first dubbed Reynolds as "Lonesome Charley" could not bear to see his friend buried on the lonesome prairie.

TALES of the

by LEE

DICK FELLOWS

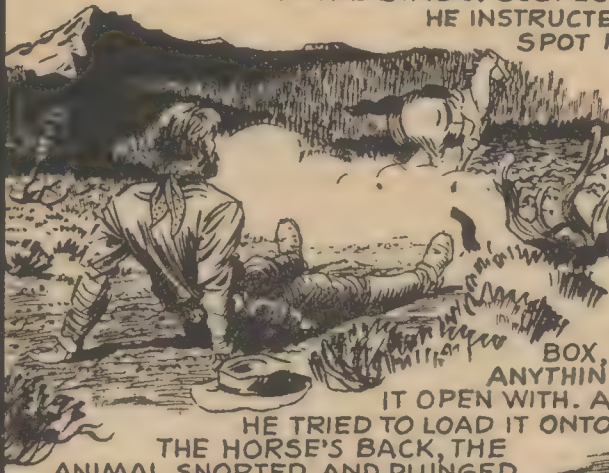
(THE OLD WEST'S UNLUCKIEST BADMAN)

TALL AND DARK, WITH HIS FIERCE BLACK BEARD, DICK FELLOWS LOOKED EVERY INCH THE BOLD, RESOURCEFUL BANDIT. HE *WAS* BOLD AND RESOURCEFUL—AND ABOUT THE UNLUCKIEST ROAD-AGENT WHO EVER ORDERED A CALIFORNIA STAGE-DRIVER TO THROW DOWN THE BOX

FELLOWS' CAREER BEGAN IN 1869, WHEN HE RELIEVED A LONE TRAVELER OF HIS POKE. BUT AN ATTEMPT TO HOLD UP A STAGECOACH NEAR SANTA BARBARA PROVED A FIASCO. SENTENCED TO SAN QUENTIN, HIS SANCTIMONIOUS BEHAVIOR SOON WON HIM A PARDON.



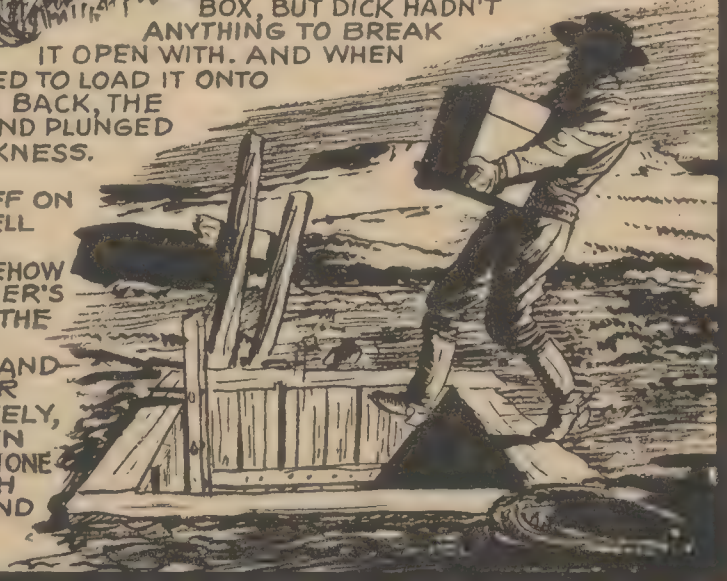
DRIFTING TO CALIENTE, DICK NOTICED THREE HEAVY BOXES BEING PLACED IN THE STAGE. SUSPECTING THEY CONTAINED SPECIE, HE INSTRUCTED A PAL TO RIDE AHEAD TO A SPOT FROM WHICH THEY COULD CUT ROUND THE MOUNTAIN AND WAYLAY IT. DICK RENTED A HORSE AND FOLLOWED. BUT THE HORSE THREW HIM—AND THEY MISSED A SHOT AT \$240,000.



FELLOWS LIMPED BACK TO TOWN, STOLE A HORSE AND STUCK UP THE INCOMING STAGE. THE DRIVER WEEKLY THREW DOWN THE MONEY BOX, BUT DICK HADN'T ANYTHING TO BREAK

IT OPEN WITH. AND WHEN HE TRIED TO LOAD IT ONTO THE HORSE'S BACK, THE ANIMAL SNORTED, AND PLUNGED AWAY INTO THE DARKNESS.

LUGGING THE BOX OFF ON FOOT, THE BANDIT FELL INTO A TUNNEL AND BROKE HIS LEG. SOMEHOW HE CRAWLED TO A MINER'S SHACK, PRIED OPEN THE BOX WITH AN AXE—IT CONTAINED \$1,800—AND THEN STOLE ANOTHER HORSE. UNFORTUNATELY, THIS ONE HAD BEEN TEMPORARILY SHOD WITH ONE MULE SHOE, WHICH MADE TRACKING AND CAPTURE EASY.



OLD WEST

LODGED IN THE BAKERSFIELD JAIL, FELLOWS RIPPED OUT A FLOOR BOARD ONE NIGHT AND STUMPED AWAY ON HIS CRUTCHES. AT A NEARBY RANCH HE STOLE A HORSE, AT ANOTHER, A SADDLE. BUT WHEN HE TRIED TO SADDLE THE BEAST, IT BROKE AWAY FROM HIM. A POSSE NABBED HIM NEXT DAY.



DICK GOT OUT OF PRISON IN '81, BOLD AND RESOURCEFUL AS EVER — BUT NO LUCKIER. HE ROBBED SEVERAL STAGECOACHES BUT THE LOOT WAS SMALL. WHILE POSSES SCoured THE COUNTRYSIDE, HE HOLED UP IN A HAYLOFT AND LIVED SUMPTUOUSLY BY RAIDING THE FARMER'S PANTRY — UNTIL THE FARMER INADVERTENTLY POKED A PITCHFORK INTO HIS HIDING PLACE AND HE WAS TAKEN AGAIN.



SENTENCED TO LIFE IMPRISONMENT, FELLOWS, AWAITING TRANSFER IN THE SANTA BARBARA JAIL, INVEIGLED THE GUARD INTO HIS CELL AND OVERPOWERED HIM. OUTSIDE, HE SPOTTED A HORSE TETHERED TO A STAKE, LEAPED ON ITS BACK AND GALLOPED OFF. BUT THE HORSE HAD BEEN EATING LOCO-WEED. SUDDENLY, IT WENT CRAZY AND THREW THE BANDIT OVER ITS HEAD. WITH THAT, DICK FELLOWS WENT QUIETLY OFF TO PRISON.



*A bullet-scarred, weary veteran,
Jim rode back home, hoping for
peace. . . . But the only peace he
was offered was that of a smoky,
boothill grave!*



Jim snapped open the blade
of steel; "Keep it on the
desk, Pepi!"

HOME IS THE KILLER!

By CHARLES BECKMAN, JR.

JIM BRADY topped the final rise and rested his piebald mare for a spell while he rolled a cigarette. As he smoked, he studied the modest ranch buildings that clustered under cottonwoods and snuggled up against a rocky butte. Poor and uncared for, they were grey for want of paint. The shabby

ranch yard was choked with weeds. At a rickety pole corral, a woman and two small boys were struggling to hoist a rail of mesquite into place.

A slow, wistful smile touched Jim's thin face. The dream of a little spread and a fair-skinned woman with eyes as blue as the

Texas skies had grown inside the tired man, until it was all that kept him alive.

Underfoot, the scraggly buffalo grass and cactus clumps still dripped dew from last night. From here, the rise sloped abruptly down to the tiny hidden valley where the ranch shacks peeped through broad-leaved cottonwoods. Somewhere down there a mockingbird warbled and a donkey brayed. Jim nudged the piebald and nosed down to the corral.

"Mornin'," Jim drawled.

The woman looked up. She lived up to all his dreams. Her skin was like rich jersey cream and her eyes were as misty blue as the Gulf of Mexico.

"Good morning." Her wide eyes drifted over him, grew disapproving. She saw a lazy-eyed hombre, thin and pale as if he'd recently had a long illness. He wore dusty, patched jeans, cracked boots with bedraggled mule-ears, and rusty spurs. His equipment consisted of an old double-rigged stock saddle on the back of which hung a bedroll and a Mexican guitar with a string missing.

"*Saddle tramp!*" her tight-lipped scrutiny plainly stated. But then her eyes fell on his faded Confederate corporal's blouse. Immediately her entire attitude changed.

"Hello, soldier," she greeted with soft warmth.

"My daddy's a sojourner," one of the freckle-faced towheads piped up. "He got killed at Shiloh."

Jim leaned over and touselled the button's cotton thatch. "Lot of brave soldiers were there, sonny. Reckon yore dad was one of the best."

"Was you there, Mister?" the younger of the two boys wanted to know.

Jim changed the subject. "That's a mighty heavy lookin' piece of timber for a woman to be histing." He swung off the mare, got a grip on the mesquite rail, and shoved it up in place.

"Thank you, Mr. —"

The lanky rider hastily removed his sweat-rimmed Stetson. "Jim Brady, Ma'am."

She held out a slim hand. "I'm Lilia Knowles."

"I know—I mean," he hastily covered up, "I'm glad to know you, Ma'am."

She was a woman of less than twenty-five. Ringlets of her brown hair were plastered to her damp forehead. She had the fair skin and clear complexion of Eastern women. The top button of her calico dress was open, baring the soft hollow of her throat.

She was a good one to remind a battle-weary soldier just how woman-hungry a man could get in four years.

Jim looked around the yard. This country was not entirely new to him. He had seen it once, briefly, five years ago from the back of a sweating stallion, with a brace of smoking guns in his hands. But that was another time and another Jim Brady—a drifting young hellion bred to trouble.

He was older now, by four years and a war he didn't win. It left him quieter, with nothing but the memory of dead friends, some freshly-healed wounds, and six months' army pay in worthless Confederate bills.

Well, the war was over, a thing to be forgotten. He had come back to pick up the threads of living. And he had chosen, for the place to do it, a town that still wanted him for an old murder. But for a coincidence and a faded daguerreotype he had carried for years, he would have given this end of Texas a wide berth.

JIM looked from the ranch yard back to the woman. "Looks like you could use a hand or two, Ma'am."

She brushed her hair back with a weary gesture. "I had to let old Frank Vasquez go a month back. He was our last hand. With this terrible drought and the cattle dying—" she shook her head with a futile gesture.

Jim nodded soberly, guessing from the worn appearance of her faded dress and the ragged jeans that barely covered the two youngster's shanks that they were hard-up in a money way.

"Well, Ma'am, a man around this place for

just one day could take care of a right smart number of chores. I'd be obliged if you'd let me tidy up for you today for meals and a shed to sleep in tonight. I'd be shovin' on in the morning."

A look of relief filled her clear blue eyes, but she held herself back. "That's very nice of you, Mr. Brady. I couldn't ask you to do a hard day's work for no pay, though."

Jim told her, "It's been four years since I tasted woman's cooking. I don't reckon you could pay me in a better way."

She smiled then. "I'll try to make it a meal you won't forget. The boys can help you. Billy and Rob, meet Mr. Brady."

Jim gravely shook hands with the two big-eyed youngsters. "If it's all right with you, Mrs. Knowles, I'll take the boys down to the creek this afternoon and we'll scare up some catfish for supper."

Jim spent the rest of the morning seeing to the most pressing needs of the little household. He rode out and caught the horse that had jumped the rickety corral. Then he cut cordwood for the kitchen stove, mended the corral so it would keep stock in, fixed the well pump, and saw to the buckboard that carried the family into town for supplies.

Before lunch, he rode out on the grazing land for a look at the stock. As Mrs. Knowles mentioned, the grass was in terrible condition from the two-year drought. He passed bloated carcasses of dead stock. Nearly all the water-holes were dried-up arroyos. The cattle he saw were huddled together in a stupor, waiting for death.

Then he headed back for the ranch. When he topped the rise and started into the little valley, he saw smoke rising from the chimney of the ranchhouse. A swirl of emotions ran through him. He'd already formed an attachment for this place. Never before in his roaming had he found a spot he wanted to call home.

But then he looked across the rolling prairie, to the south in the direction of the town of Twin Wells. His hand moved instinctively toward his right thigh, where he used to

carry his six-gun. Death waited for him over there, in the bullets of Jack Wallace's guns because of an old murder he didn't commit. It was an unpleasant chore he must see to eventually if he did settle in these parts.

The knowledge gave him a cold, empty feeling. He'd had enough of killing.

Early that afternoon, Jim rode to the creek a few miles from the place. The two buttons were riding with him, one in front and one aft. Billy, the oldest, bouncing astern, clutched a feed sack filled with jangling turkey bells.

"Never heard of fishing with turkey bells afore," the cotton-top muttered. "How th' gosh-all you expect to ketch any catfish with these ol' things!"

"You just keep yore britches on," Jim ordered. "I was catching catfish long afore you saw the light of day."

When they got within a quarter of a mile of the creek, they were halted by a rail fence.

Jim swore under his breath, "Who put this thing here? No wonder yore maw's cattle are thirstin' to death."

"That mean old Mr. Blakely," five-year-old Rob piped up. "He won't let nobody have his ol' water, 'ceptin' his own cows."

"He wants to buy Maw's ranch," Billy added. "But he don't want to pay what she's askin. Figures to get it for almost nothin."

Jim shook his head. "That's a mighty low-down trick. There's plenty of water in that crick for his cattle and her'n, both."

He tied the piebald in the shade of a huisache tree and the three of them crawled through the fence and struck off down a ravine to the creek bottom. Here, it was cool. Giant cottonwoods, liveoak, and huisache trees shaded the blistering mid-day sun. The creek had a snow-white gravel bottom. It was low from the drought, but still had plenty of water, fed by deep springs.

"Now I'll show you how to catch fish the easy way," Brady told the interested youngsters. He cut springy willow branches, thrust them in the soft banks near the water's edge.

HOME IS THE KILLER!

To their ends, he fastened short throw lines and baited the hooks with cubes of yellow laundry soap. After the hooks were tossed out in the water, he tied the bells to the willow branches. In all, he set a dozen hooks that way.

"Now we don't have to be eternally watchin' them," he explained. "Old Mr. Catfish will let us know when he's caught, by ringing the bell."

Billy shook his head in disbelief. "Never heard of nobody wantin' to eat *laundry* soap."

"Fish got a different kind of taster from you," Jim explained.

"Maw washed my mouth out with soap oncet," Rob proclaimed. "I said a bad word."

THEY walked downstream a spell, took their boots off and waded in the cool, clear water. Then they sat under the shade of a cottonwood. Jim took out his harmonica and played for them. After that, he told them a hair-raising story about fighting Indians in Arizona, which he made up as he went along. He was just at the point of getting scalped by a dozen howling redskins, when one of the cowbells set up a loud clamor.

With excited yelps, the two cotton-heads were down the bank in a flash. By the time Jim got there, they had hauled out a good sized, wriggling blue channel cat. It flopped around on the grassy bank while the boys pranced around it, beside themselves with excitement.

Jim barely got that one off the hook and strung up when another bell jangled. Within an hour, they had a half dozen eating-size blue cats and one mud cat. "Throw the yellow one back," Jim advised. "These blue cats taste a lot better."

They started up the bank, back to the horse. Then some bushes rustled and a hard-faced man wearing leather chaps came into the clearing. He held a long army rifle loosely in the crook of his arm.

"Oh-oh," Billy whispered, "That's ol' Mr. Blakely's foreman. Bet he'll be mad 'cause we're on his property."

The dark-faced man moved down to them. "Don't reckon you knew it, but you're trespassin'."

"Just doin' a little fishin'," Jim said mildly. "Didn't see no harm in that."

The foreman jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "You crossed the fence back yonder. I saw where yore horse is tied. In case you don't know, Mister, in Texas when you cross another man's fence, you're trespassin'."

"It depends," Jim muttered, beginning to get riled, "on whose fence it is."

The other man's face darkened. But just then little Rob stepped in and brought things to a head. He kicked Blakely's foreman on the shin. The dark man swore and back-handed Rob sprawling. Billy set up a howl at that and grabbed a rock and heaved it at the foreman. The man cocked his rifle, swearing he'd kill them all.

Jim moved in what appeared to be a slow, easy way. But before the startled foreman knew what happened, the rifle had been knocked aside and twisted out of his hands. Then the butt of it slammed into his chest and he sat down with a thud. He found himself gazing into the muzzle of his own gun.

"Don't pick on kids, Mister," Jim said, his slow drawl deadly now. "Pick up yore fish, boys and let's git before I really get mad."

They walked back to the fence and Jim broke the rifle over a post. All the way back to the ranch, the boys rattled without pausing for breath. They retold the encounter a dozen times, retouching it with each telling. Jim Brady was a hero to them already.

Jim warned them, "Better not tell yore Maw about that little fracas. She might not let us go fishin' any more."

The boys swore themselves to secrecy. "Is yore Maw really fixin' to sell this place?"

Billy nodded soberly. "She's turned it

over to Mr. Perkins, the real-estate man. She says it's more'n a widder woman an' two kids can handle with the drought an' all."

Jim frowned. "Where will you all go?"

"Maw's fixin' to git us a new Paw," Rob enlightened him. "Th' Coun'ny Judge, Mr. Strickland. He comes out to see her every night."

A cold spot formed behind Jim's breast bone. "You boys like him?"

"Aw, he's all right," Billy shrugged with no enthusiasm.

Jim rode the rest of the way in thoughtful silence.

For supper, they feasted on fried catfish, corn bread and thick molasses, pinto beans; and potatoes baked in mud jackets. For dessert, the young widow had made an apple pie.

They sat around the red-checkered table cloth, eating and laughing. The boys' faces had been scrubbed until their freckles shone like splotches of burnished copper. Their tangled cotton mops had been watered, brushed, and plastered down. In the mellow lamp light, the woman looked beautiful, her skin flushed from the heat of the kitchen, her brown hair plaited, and her blue eyes dancing with merriment. •

"It's—it's good to have a man around the place again," she said, then blushed and lowered her eyes.

AFTER the dishes were cleared away, they all sat out on the front porch. Lilia Knowles rocked in the swing, the boys sat on the steps, and Jim propped his back against a post and strummed his guitar for them, singing range ballads. Then he spun stories for the boys.

They had grown into a happy, comfortable group, when a rider came into the yard. The boys' mother arose, somewhat confused. "Jim, would you mind entertaining the boys for the rest of the evening? That's Mr. Strickland coming to call on me."

The County Judge, a tall, florid-faced man in his mid-thirties came up on the porch.

He was dressed in a handsome, tan broad-cloth suit and shiny, hand-tooled boots.

"Ben—Mr. Strickland, this is Jim Brady," she introduced. "Jim is a temporary hand I've hired to do some chores around the place."

Strickland nodded at him coolly. The two men measured each other across the shadowy porch. "I thought," Strickland said, "That there was a bunkhouse in the back for hired hands."

Jim felt his muscles bunch. He arose slowly.

Lilia Knowles hastily stood up and moved between them. "Jim has been entertaining the boys with some of his experiences in the West." Her eyes turned to him, "Jim, would you see that the boys go off to bed in a half hour?" Then she slipped her hand into the crook of Strickland's arm. "Come, Ben. Let's go into the parlor."

The air of tension remained, like the swirl of muddy water, even after Strickland had gone into the house and Jim sat down again with the boys.

After a bit, he sent the youngsters off to bed and walked down to the corral for a smoke before turning in. From here, he could see the lamplight spilling out of the parlor where Lilia Knowles and Ben Strickland sat. The thought of them there together galled him. He realized he had no claim on this woman he had met only a few hours ago.

But there had been an instant nearness between them and he knew that she was the woman and this was the ranch he had dreamed about through four weary years of war. The thought that he had come this near to finding her, only to have her snatched away by a pompous, small-town politician both angered and frightened him.

He realized that he did not know how to approach this kind of woman. His only experience, before and during the war, had been with the painted variety who hung around saloons and talked in loud, brassy voices, using the language of men. And he had nothing to offer her; he was just a pen-

niless soldier back from the wars. Still, he stubbornly refused to concede that he could not make her his own. There had been a rightness about their being together that went beyond any conventions and economic pressure.

He was on his third cigaret when the front screen door twanged. Presently, he heard the sigh of saddle leather, then the rustle of shod hoofs. Strictland passed near him on his way out to the lane. He drew rein for a moment, looking down at the lean veteran.

"I think Mrs. Knowles has all her chores taken care of now. You'd better be riding on in the morning, cowboy. It doesn't look good for a lone, young, ranchhand to be staying out here, with her a widow by herself." He flipped his rowels against his horse and trotted down the lane.

Jim threw down his cigaret with impotent rage. He wouldn't start a ruckus for Lilia Knowles' sake, but he'd sure admire to drag that smart aleck dude off his horse and rub his face in the dirt.

Lilia's voice floated across the darkness to him, softly. "Jim—"

He walked to the porch where she was standing in a patch of moonlight. "Ben is a little jealous, I think," she smiled. "I hope he didn't get nasty with you."

Jim shrugged it off. He stood looking up at her there in the moonlight and he thought she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. "You're kinda gone on him?" he asked crudely.

Her face drew back in the shadows. "He's nice, Jim. He's a good, substantial person, and he's in love with me."

Jim's mouth felt as dry as the parched prairie land. "You're in love with him?"

"I told him tonight that I would marry him."

The earth slid from beneath Jim's feet. He felt kind of sick inside, like the time the Yankee bayonet had gone through his shoulder.

"I'm so tired of fighting it alone," she whispered. "Everything is gone. The cattle

are dying like flies. I just wasn't meant to be a ranch woman. I came out from the East, just a girl; Tommy married me, he took care of the ranch, everything. Then he marched away to war, leaving me with our two boys. And he was killed at Shiloh." Her voice trembled for a moment. "Ben can take good care of me and the boys. I won't have to fight anymore." She sighed. "I'm so tired, Jim. I need somebody to lean on."

He tried to find the right words. "You still didn't say if you loved him."

She kept her face in the shadows. "Don't ask me that, Jim."

Then he was up on the porch beside her. "Lilia—"

She was trembling. "No, Jim. Please—" She tried to push him away, but her hands were weak. With a little cry, she suddenly leaned forward, pressing her forehead against his shoulder.

HIS arms went around her clumsily. "You felt it too. Right away."

She was crying softly. "I won't let it happen, Jim," she whispered, fiercely. "*I won't.*" Her body was trembling against him. "You stand for everything I've grown to hate. You're just a poor drifter. You're like Tommy. You'd want to stay here and fight all of it, the drought, Blakely and his fences, the mortgages. Just for the sake of the land." She hammered at him with her small balled fists. "Well, I say to *hell* with the land. I want to go somewhere where life isn't a constant, bitter struggle!"

He held her lightly, brushing the strands of brown hair away from the small, sweet oval of her face with his clumsy fingers, touching her cheeks wonderingly. "Out there," he said haltingly, "I used to think about something like this. A spread under the cottonwood trees, and a purty wife to set with in the cool of the evenings on the porch. Maybe some youngers playing around. I kept thinking about it when other men were dying around me. I kinda think that's what kept me alive through all of it."

"Oh, Jim!" Her voice was a tortured gasp. Her lips were suddenly against his and she was close to him, setting the woman-hunger in him on fire.

But then she pushed herself away. "Damn you," she whispered, tears running down her cheeks. "Go away, Jim. Please leave in the morning. Don't make it hard on me." She turned and fled into the house.

Jim stood there a while longer, then he went around back to the bunkhouse to spend a sleepless night smoking up a sack of Bull Durham.

At daybreak, Jim saddled up and rode to Twin Wells. By the time he arrived, the town was awake. It was only a cluster of shacks, squatting in the middle of the Texas prairie along a single rutted dirt lane that wound in from one side and meandered out the other, fading into the endless rolling flatland covered with scrubby chaparral.

Jim rode along this crooked main street, bent over slightly in the saddle, his wide-brimmed hat pulled over his eyes. He studied the names on the front of buildings. Finally he stopped before one that bore the sign, "The Ace-In-The-Hole Saloon. Pepi Lopez, Proprietor." Here, he tied up at a hitch rail and walked in.

The saloon had just opened for business. The bartender was sorting coins into the cash register, while a boy mopped the floor. Jim walked into a back office without knocking. Pepi Lopez was seated at a desk, poring over his books. He looked up when Jim entered. At first his mind wouldn't believe what his eyes saw. Then the color drained from his face and his mouth sagged open. His cigar fell to the desk in a shower of sparks.

Smiling tightly, Jim swung a leg over the corner of the desk and sat. "Hello, Pepi," he greeted.

The swarthy-faced saloon keeper's lips worked without sound. Shakily, his left hand trailed across the desk toward a drawer. Without a flicker on his face, Jim quietly took out a spring-blade pocket knife, snapped

open the six-inch steel blade, and touched its point to Lopez's wrist. "Keep it on the desk, huh, Pepi?"

Beaded sweat broke out across the other man's forehead. "What do you want, Jim?" he asked hoarsely.

"Just some things I left with you for safe keepin', four years ago," Jim said mildly. "Remember, Pepi? Or, didn't you think I'd come back."

THE saloon owner ran a trembling forefinger around his collar. "Sure, Jim. Sure, I knew you'd come back all right. I got everything for you, just the way you left it."

Jim glanced around the pine-paneled room. "You done right well these last four years. Long time since you and me and Jack Wallace rode the owlhoot together, huh?"

Lopez's eyes rotated nervously. "Look, that's all in the past, Jim. I got a good, legitimate business here. I'm operating on the right side of the law."

"Sure, you're all right. And how about Jack Wallace? You know I heard some disturbin' news about him after I got in the army. I heard he paid off that scrawny depot agent to swear I was the one who killed the Wells Fargo guard that time we busted this town open. Guess he figured I'd get myself killed fighting the Yankees, so it would be all right all the way around. But you and I know different, don't we, Pepi? We know that it was Jack who was the leader of our bunch, and the one who put the bullet in the guard."

Shakily, Pepi Lopez mopped his brow. "Look, Jim, why did you have to come back here? All that happened five years ago. They ain't lookin' for you no more, unless you hang around here, stirring up old trouble that's nearly forgotten. Look, I'll give you every bit of the money you left with me, plus interest. Then why don't you git? Ride somewhere else . . ."

"I happen to like it here," Jim explained. He stood up. "I don't want any of that

money, Lopez. I'm startin' out clean this time. But I did leave a good horse, saddle, and a brace of guns with you. They must have been worth close to five hundred dollars."

Lopez went to the safe, swearing under his breath. He twirled the knob, the light flashing on a diamond ring on his little finger. He drew out a sheath of United States currency, counted off five one-hundred-dollar bills, and handed them to Jim. "You know what'll happen if you stay around here any time. Jack Wallace, he's still in these parts. He'll gun you down to keep himself safe over that old killing. Either that, or people will notice you around town and somebody will remember what the old dodger poster looked like."

Jim put the money in a shirt pocket. "Thanks for the advice, Pepi. I reckon I can look out for myself, though."

Lopez waited until he had gone out the front of the saloon. Then he grabbed up his hat and hurried out a back door.

Jim made several stops, most of them to buy some equipment, one to send a telegram. Then he headed back to the Knowles ranch.

Lilia was in the back yard hanging out clothes when he rode in. Seeing him, her face paled. She stood there, soapy hands clenched at her side. "I thought you'd left, Jim. Please, don't stay around any longer. I made up my mind about things last night. I want you to go."

Jim leaned over the saddle horn. "I come back to make you a proposition. I want to buy your cattle."

Her mouth opened with surprise. "You don't have any money!"

"I got a little. I intend to pay cash."

"But they aren't worth anything. They're all dying."

"They'd be worth something if we could feed 'em up enough to get 'em to market. There's a real good market for beef right now, with the drought cutting short the supply, and the markets to the North wide open again. I figure you got about a hundred head

left, but they'll all be dead in a few weeks. I'll give you a dollar apiece for them the way they stand now, if you'll let me keep them on your place for about a month before I drive them to the shipping center."

"I don't know."

"You're aiming on selling the place, ain't you? Seems like you'd be glad to get shut of them. I'll promise to keep out of your way, camp out on the range if you'd rather."

"Well, all right. We could use the money, I guess."

Jim took out one of the crisp one-hundred-dollar bills. "You draw me up a bill of sale." He started to ride away, but pulled back. "Another thing, I can use the boys' help, if they want to earn a little extra cash."

That afternoon, Rob and Billie trailed after Jim. They spent the next few days making mops dipped in kerosene oil, which they used to burn the spines off prickly pear. As fast as they had a clump burned off, they'd drive the cattle to it. The starved beasts fell on it, greedily gorging themselves with the succulent green leaves, the first real feed they'd had in months. Before the week was out, Jim got a reply to his telegram. A well-driller came out with a couple of shiny new windmills. Jim helping, he had them up in a few days, and then the water problem was under control. There wasn't enough cactus to sustain the cattle indefinitely, but they were visibly strengthened. It was a relatively healthy-looking herd of beef that Jim got together for the trail before the end of the month.

THAT day, he found that his show-down with Jack Wallace was drawing near. It came in the form of a rifle bullet, slapping the wind inches from his ear. He piled off his pony and scrambled for the shelter of a boulder, cocking his own saddle gun. The bullet, he knew, had come from a clump of mesquite not too far distant. It was safe to reason that Wallace had trailed him out here and shot at him. Nobody else in these parts wanted him dead that bad. He sat there un-

til sundown, but no one showed in the mesquite thicket. Then, under cover of night, he began moving the herd toward Corpus Christi where buyers were shipping cattle by boat to New Orleans, up the Mississippi to St. Louis and Chicago.

A week later, Jim Brady returned to Twin Wells, a thousand dollars richer. The first stop he made was at the real estate office where he completed the transaction for the purchase of the Knowles "Double K" ranch. Deed in his pocket, he rode down the lane to the ranch yard.

Half of the dream had come true. The ranch was his now. But, he knew, it would be meaningless, without the woman to go with it. He could cope with problems of cattle and water; but how to change a woman's way of thinking had him stumped.

He tied up his pony near the house, walked in the front door. Lilia had a pattern and a bolt of cloth spread out on the dining room table. As she looked up, her face paled and her hand went to her throat.

Jim took off his hat, crushed the brim in his hands. "When I came here a month ago, I didn't have anything. Reckon I didn't have the right to speak to you. But today I bought this ranch." He took out the deed and laid it on the table. "Now I got a home, like a man should have when he asks a woman to marry him."

"Marry—" her face was dead white. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

He tried to take her in his arms the way he had done that night. But she fought him off. Jim didn't hear the buckboard out in the yard, or the closing of the screen door. He didn't realize someone else was in the room until a hand yanked him away from Lilia, and he turned to face the gun held in the hand of the livid Ben Strictland.

"I heard he was in town," Strictland raged. "Perkins, the real estate man, hurried to the courthouse just before noon. Said a man answering the description we had out, had come to his office just before noon with a thousand dollars cash and bought this place.

Of course I knew it was him, so I hurried right out. Lucky I got here when I did. And it looks as if I'm in time."

Lilia swayed against the table, looking ill. She pressed her hand against her cheek. "Why did you come back, Jim? Why? You fool!"

He stared at them, puzzled. "I don't savvy this."

Strictland's lips curled. "Coming back here after five years and masquerading as a Confederate veteran! Thought nobody'd remember you, huh? Well, I did, long-rider. You looked familiar to me that first night. The sheriff didn't have all the records; had to send to Austin. It took a few weeks to get here, so we could be sure. You used to go under the name of Jim Bandy, or the "Bandy Kid" as your outlaw pals called you. You're still wanted for the murder of a Wells Fargo guard around these parts you know."

It had caught up with him. He'd known it would come, sooner or later, this showdown with Jack Wallace. Now he could no longer put it off.

His hand swept up the bolt of cloth, hurling it in Strictland's face. Blinded by the flurry of silk, the judge was afraid to shoot because of Lilia who was standing near Jim. Brady took advantage of the moment of confusion to jump past the county judge and vault out a window. He was on his horse and pounding down the lane when Strictland began shooting out of the window. One bullet clipped by Jim's ear. Then he was out of range.

A few miles away, he circled and headed back to the ranch, coming in the back way. The place looked deserted. Strictland, no doubt had taken Lilia and the kids into town for safekeeping. In the bunkhouse, Jim found what he was after. He had seen them here when he first came to the ranch, a brace of well-oiled side guns kept in good condition. They bore the initials T. K., burned in the bone handles. Tommy Knowles, Lilia's husband, killed at Shiloh.

JIM BRADY rode into Twin Wells, the pistols buckled around his waist. It had been a long time since he'd carried these kind of arms. In the army, he had used a rifle. He wondered how slow his draw would be after all these years.

He tied up at Pepi Lopez's place. Inside, it was cool and dark. A few men stood at the bar and a domino game was going on in one corner. Lopez was holding a conversation with the bartender. Jim walked up and put his hand on Lopez's arm.

The saloon owner spun around. His eyes became hooded, his lips thin. "Damn you, Jim," he spat, "I told you to keep away from this town. Now they're after you. The sheriff is getting a posse together to go after you."

"Yeah," Jim said. "And you also told Jack Wallace that I was back. You were the only one who knew until a day or two ago. Yet, more than a week ago, some bushwacker took a shot at me out on the Double K range. Couldn't have been nobody but Jack. Now I want you to tell me where he is. Then you, and him, and me, and that station agent is all goin' down to have a talk with the sheriff. We're goin' to get it straight just who it was killed that Wells Fargo guard."

Lopez licked his lips. Once his beady eyes darted toward the balcony that ran around the inside of the saloon. It was an almost imperceptible glance, but it gave Jim his warning and he whipped around. The bullet, intended to strike him between his shoulder blades, only clipped his arm. Men at the bar scattered. The domino table spilled over and the players scuttled through the bat-wing doors. Jim's hand plunged to his side, came up with the old single-action Colt blasting. His shot mingled with Jack Wallace's second in a blend of noise and smoke. When it cleared away, the man on the balcony had spun around, clutching a shattered arm and his pistol lay on the floor below.

Brady raced up the stairs, two at a time. Jack Wallace was running back to the room

where he'd stayed the past few days. He was trying to crawl out a window when Jim got there. Brady hauled the outlaw back into the room by the seat of his trousers. "We got a call to make together, Jack," Jim Brady panted.

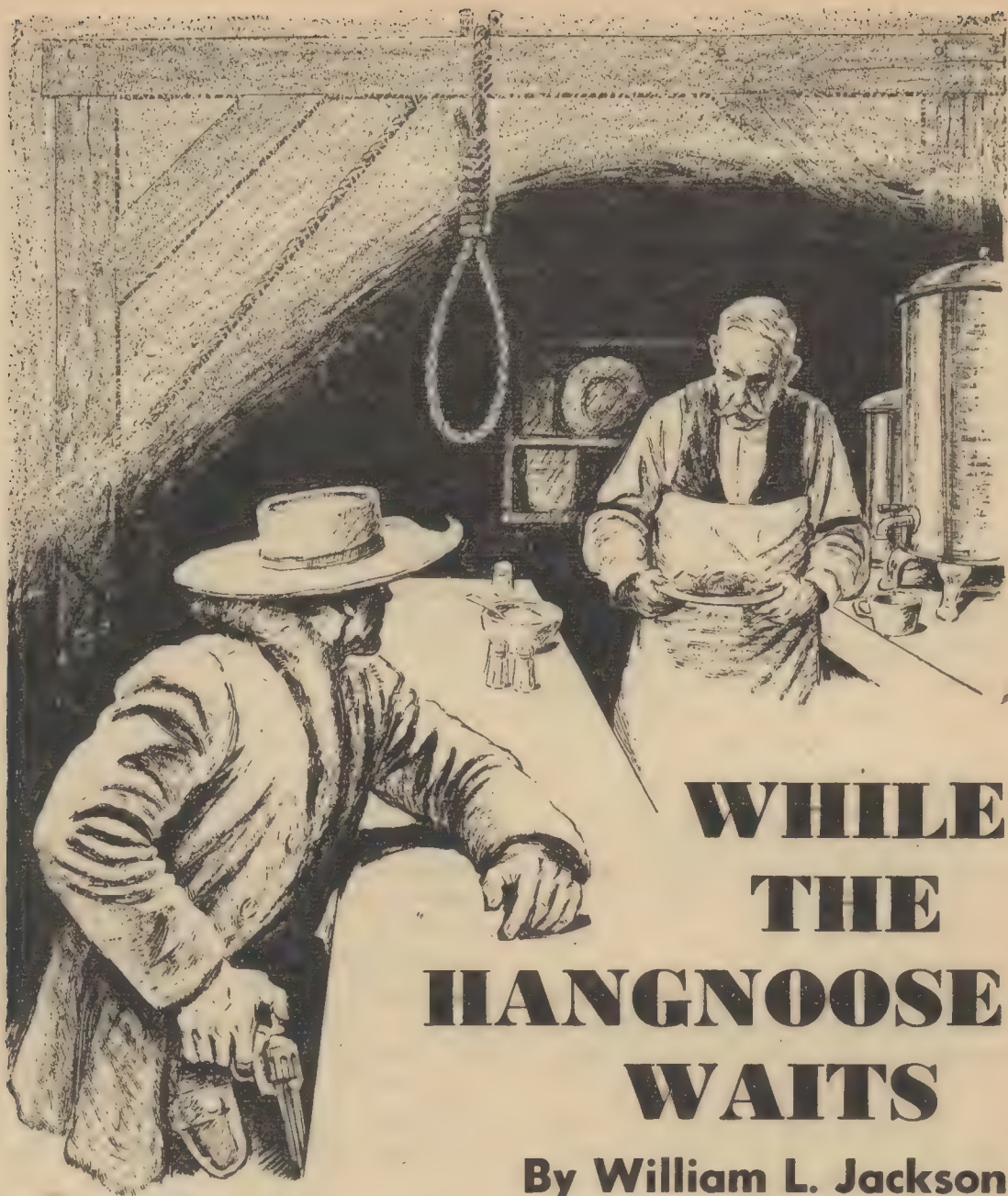
It took a couple of days to have a grand jury hearing on the old murder, during which time Jim had to stay in jail with the rest of them. But with the old station agent breaking down and admitting the truth, and Pepi Lopez agreeing loudly and eloquently, there was no question left about the old Wells Fargo killing. True, there was still the old, armed robbery charge, but Pepi Lopez shucked out money from his safe to cover the stolen amount and, taking his service in the army into consideration, the jury of Texans, with the sanction of the governor, gave Jim a full pardon.

Late that evening, he rode out to the Double K ranch, his spread, now. When he stopped in the yard, he saw that Lilia Knowles was waiting on the front porch.

"Darn you, Jim Brady," she raged when he came up to her, hat in hand. Tears dampened her eyes. "I was supposed to marry Ben Strickland yesterday, but the kids ran down in the mesquite thicket and hid. They said they wouldn't have any other daddy unless he could take them fishing, and tell stories, and play the guitar like you do. An' I couldn't get married with my boys hid out in the brush that-a-way—an' I didn't want to marry that stuffed shirt anyway. Oh, Jim!" She rushed into his arms with a choked cry.

Jim held her gently. He was home at last. Here was his dream of a fair-skinned woman with blue eyes.

He remembered that faded picture in his pocket—the one he had found near the dead Johnny Reb at Shiloh. He had carried it in his pocket at Gettysburg, Richmond, and finally Appomattox. Now, he thought, he would destroy it. He had no more use for it—he had finally come home to the real thing.



He won't bluff the younger man thought....

In Two Forks, a stranger could either ride out peaceful—the way he came in—or decorate the town's gallows, which was always ready and waiting!

WHILE THE HANGNOOSE WAITS

By William L. Jackson

THE town of Two Forks was quiet tonight, and the sounds of a trail town's evening beginning did not carry along its streets. The fresh-cut pine smell of a newly-erected gallows beside the jail was pulled along the street on the chill evening breeze, and the effect of what had happened on that scaffold tonight brought a stillness to the town.

The tall young stranger entering town on his lame and trail-weary horse smelled the odor of fresh pine and rope, and he noted the silence which lay over the town. His horse's hoofs sent up their hollow and lonely sound, and somewhere along the street a dog barked and was stilled. The slim stranger reigned in across the street from the town's only small restaurant and shrugged deeper into his rough-edged and ragged sheepskin jacket.

He crossed the street immediately, and as he edged toward the restaurant door he squared his shoulders and pulled his flat and dusty Stetson straight on his head. One hand he kept inside his jacket, flat against the hardness of an army pistol in his belt.

When he entered the restaurant he saw that it wasn't much, just a little place staying open late to take in enough money to stay in business. But it was clean. The counter was spotless and the heavy dishes stacked on the shelves behind shone dully in the yellow lamplight.

The slim man in the sheepskin jacket wondered if the owner of the place worked hard to keep it glistening like this, and the gun in his belt was suddenly heavy. But he did not lose his nerve. Not now. His mind was made up. He sat heavily on a stool at the counter and waited for the old man behind the counter to approach him.

At the other end of the short counter he saw a man in puncher's clothes finishing a late supper, and his breath caught in his throat. He would have to wait until the puncher left. He didn't want to hurt anybody.

The cook approached him and leaned over the counter, his thin, friendly face all calm gray eyes. "Evening," he said.

"Evening," the slim man said. "Looks like you had a hanging in town tonight."

The old man straightened and looked at him levelly, and he felt the eyes of the puncher at the counter swiveling quickly toward him. "Yes," the cook said calmly.

"They hung a man tonight. What'll you have?"

"Coffee." He laid a coin on the counter, the last coin from his pocket.

"That all?" The cook's gray eyes quizzed him and measured him.

"That's all." He said it as short and hard as possible, and the cook turned away, his apron swishing about his thin legs. The slim stranger turned his head and looked out the window-until he heard the puncher slide back his plate and leave behind him. He waited until he heard the hoofs of this man's horse in the street, and then he tugged the pistol free from inside his coat.

THE big revolver was half revealed when the cook returned and set a plate of steaming food before him, following this with a large cup and heavy silverware. The slim man dropped his eyes to the food, and the pistol slid back into his belt. His face loosened and his tired blue eyes softened as he looked up at the cook. Then the hardness returned to his eyes and his hand went back into his coat.

"I said I wanted coffee," he said, and pride was a stiff and harsh thing in his voice.

The cook's gray eyes widened. "You got hash," he said. "It's all I've got, and you eat it." He poked a forefinger at the slim man. "Leave the gun in your coat and let me tell you something. I'm too old to be afraid of guns."

He won't bluff, the younger man thought. I don't want to hurt the old fool. He took his hand from his pocket and began to eat, gulping the warm, salty hash in great mouthfuls. Three times the large fork dipped and rose, and then he said, "What's the game?"

The old man's gray eyes smiled and his face moved closer. "That's more like it," he said. "My name is Art."

The slim stranger looked at him and continued to chew silently. "All right," the old man said. "Name's ain't necessary." He

looked for a long moment at the stranger's eyes. "You've had some pretty tough breaks, ain't you?"

The stranger's lips tightened and his eyes withdrew again. "As tough as some, I guess," he said.

"Hell, lad, it's written all over you," the old man said. "Lost your spread to the drouth, didn't you?"

A small muscle knotted and moved convulsively in the slim man's jaw as he chewed. "What if I did?"

"You needn't be so ringy about it," the old man said. "I'm only trying to get you pegged right."

The stranger swallowed and looked at him sharply. "Enough palaver," he said. "I asked you what the game is."

"It's a loan."

"Nobody's throwing money away like that these days."

"You know they ain't," Art said. He spread his hands on the counter. "You'll be back with it. The others all were."

"Others? What do you expect me to swallow, old man?"

"Yeah, others." The old man's voice was stiff now, and angry. "You ain't the first man ever hurt, so stop feeling so sorry for yourself. Don't think I haven't seen plenty of 'em coming through a town like this.

"It's an old story. Drought's all over this part of the country. Sometimes a man nearly goes under fighting it. He loses his beef, then his spread, and often self-respect ain't far behind. If a man takes a beating long enough he gets foolish. Some of 'em end up like that one down at the end of the street tonight, and that ain't pretty. Others come along and are willing to listen to reason.

"First one came in here about a month ago. A fellow named McGrath. Just like you—hurtin'. I staked him and he came back with enough to pay off and stake another. I've had quite a few since. Almost every man needs a hand now and then, if he ain't too much of a fool to take it. McGrath's assistant to the agent down at the depot now. He makes more money than I do. If they aren't too busy there tonight he'll be in for coffee soon."

The slim man's face softened again and some of the ice in his blue eyes melted. He ate more slowly, and he didn't look up at Art.

The door opened behind him and Art said softly, "Here's McGrath now." Louder, he said, "Evening, Mac."

"Evening, Art." It was the voice of a confident man.

The slim man turned slightly on his stool

(Continued on page 107)

WHEN THE REINS CAME

IT FREQUENTLY HAPPENED on the plains that a rider was caught out overnight and had to stake out his horse while he slept. This would be all right if the rider had a stake, or had a tree or bush to tie the animal to.

But how are you gonna stake a horse when you ain't got no stake?

The plains cowboy had an answer to that one, too. He took his pocket knife and dug a narrow but deep hole in the hard ground. Then he made a big knot in the end of his stake rope or bridle rein, and shoved the knot down to the bottom of the stake hole. Then he pushed the dirt back into the hole, tamping it down good, burying the knot so deeply that the horse couldn't pull it up.

Unless it rained! In which case, he'd always been puttin' off to do a spell of walking, anyhow, so. . . .

Echols

Next

Published

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

Issue

March 6th

Howdy friends! Hang on to your Stetsons and have a look at the preview of the action-packed yarn by one of your favorite writers, Kenneth L. Sinclair. This fast-moving story about Mike McGuire, a rough and ready frontier freighter, will be featured in next month's issue.



McGuire was big, with hands that could break a pick handle and shoulders that made women look twice. His quick-flaring temper brought him to Tres Orejas to find a couple of skunks named Porter and Callahan, rival freighters, who McGuire suspected had tried to wreck his wagons.



Inside their office, Mike encountered Sim Porter, the custom-tailored gent he'd beaten up once before, and a slim, dark-eyed colleen. Both were out to stop his carrying out a freighting contract. "Beat him up and throw him out!" ordered Porter, and the girl enjoyed his unequal battle.



Later, back in his own camp, Mike found the place all but deserted, and his mules run off. Time was running out. The teamster left on guard had been knocked unconscious by the mysterious attackers. Then Mike saw the defiant note that had been tacked to one of his wagons. . . .



Fighting mad, he recovered his mules and assembled his men. Headed toward the mine, they ran into an ambush and found themselves surrounded by Porter and Callahan's men. How Mike meets the challenge is a suspense-filled story. Read "Freight Wagon War," in the May issue.

• • END OF THE

By HASCAL GILES

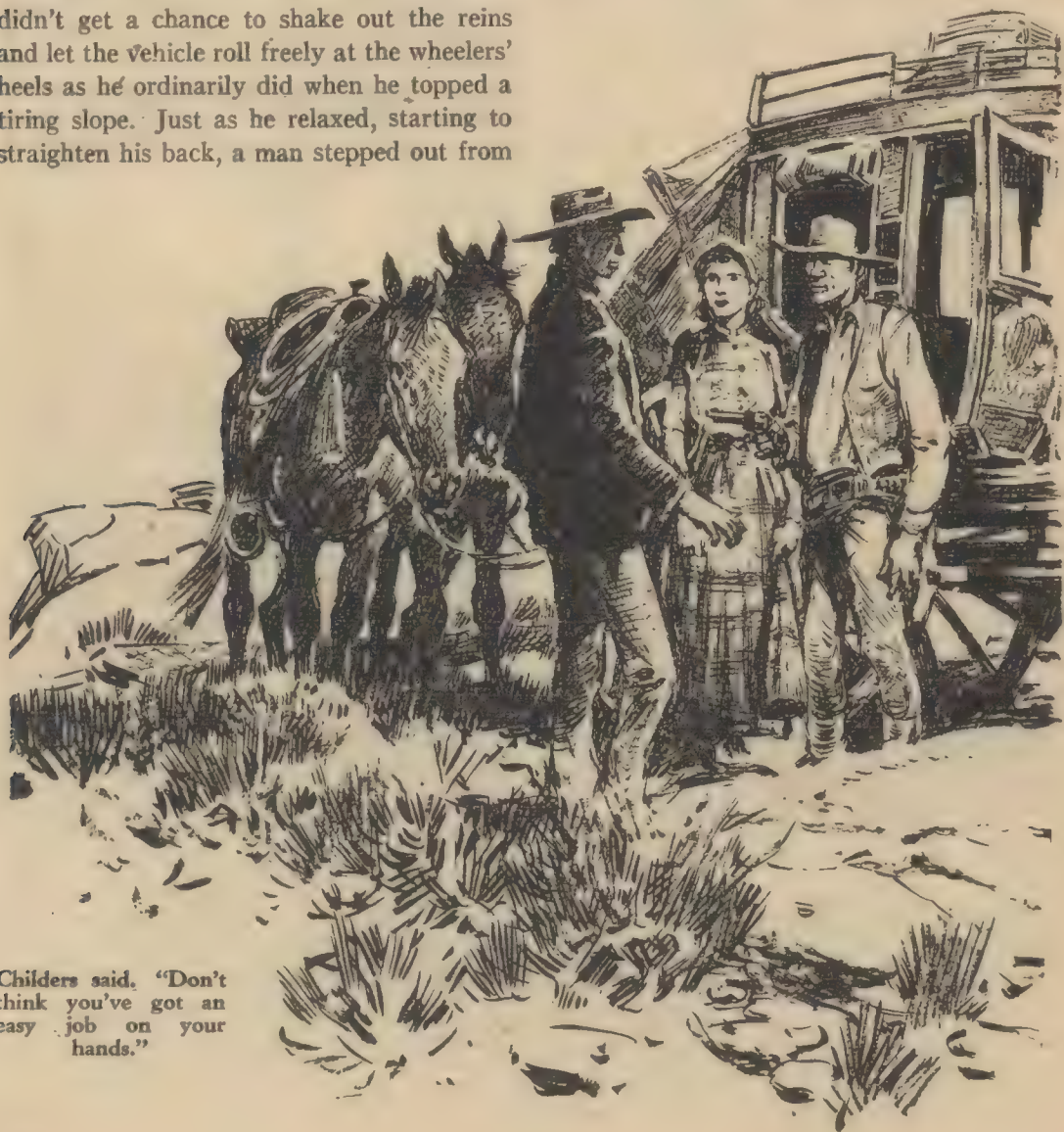
CHAPTER ONE

An Unscheduled Stop

THE stagecoach struggled across the brow of the ridge with the driver hunched forward on the seat as if he were pulling as much weight as the six, winded horses in the traces. But the man didn't get a chance to shake out the reins and let the vehicle roll freely at the wheelers' heels as he ordinarily did when he topped a tiring slope. Just as he relaxed, starting to straighten his back, a man stepped out from

the side of the trail. He had his hat in his hand, waving it as a signal, while he held on to the bridle of a saddled buckskin with the other.

The coach scraped to a stop, ten feet from the unmounted man, and the driver looked down at him as if he wanted to drop the



Childers said, "Don't think you've got an easy job on your hands."

MANHUNT TRAIL

When Marshal Roscoe at last picked up the man he'd been hunting, he didn't count on that fugitive holding a card up his sleeve—a calico-clad ace of hearts, who'd make him hate his badge and the grim chore that faced him.



leather lines in his hands and pick up the rifle under the seat.

"No trouble, driver," the man said. "I just want to tie my horse on and ride into Scrub Pine with you."

"It's less'n ten miles, mister," the driver said suspiciously. He kept staring at the man who had flagged him, knowing there was a sign to be read in his face, and not knowing what it was. The buckskin didn't look tired, and the man looked determined. He had picked this spot carefully. There was no way of seeing him until the coach was almost upon him, and no way of getting past him without running him down. But the coach carried nothing of value, except, perhaps, the possessions of the two passengers inside, and the driver finally shrugged.

"That'll be about a buck," the driver said.

Nodding, the man flipped a coin toward the spring seat, and moved to the back of the coach. He fastened a lead rope to the rear baggage boot, and climbed inside.

He put his head out the window, calling, "You can roll any time," and then turned his attention to the two passengers. The long-legged young man with the sun-darkened face, and the red-haired woman sat very close together on the hard leather cushions of the opposite seat. The new passenger let his bleak, gray eyes run over them, and he saw they were tired—and scared. The circumstances by which he had entered the coach had given him away. They knew he had chosen this manner to prevent anyone inside from leaping out and running.

I might as well introduce myself right now, he thought, and let them know they've got good reason to be scared. I might as well look him in the eye and say I'm Quent Roscoe, and I know you are Matt Childers. We've got a score to settle, so let's get about it!

The coach lurched as the driver kicked the brake free, jostling them all, and the girl realized her guilty pose. She moved away from Matt Childers, staring studiously out the window at the drab sage and rock

beside the cleared trail. Quent Roscoe could see the black-butted .45 in Matt Childers' holster now, and he knew it was the wrong time to make a move. Whatever had brought Childers back home was more pressing than his fear, and he wouldn't be taken easily. A cramped stagecoach was a bad place for gunfire.

Matt Childers pulled tobacco and papers from the pocket of his faded flannel shirt, and Quent decided it was a suitable way to relieve the awkwardness of his presence. He took a thin cheroot from the outside pocket of his black moleskin coat, rustling the folded telegram which had told him how easily he could find Matt Childers after three years of looking in vain. Quent had camped on the crest of the ridge for three days, studying with the glasses he carried in his saddlebags the passengers of every incoming coach until he spotted the one carrying a man and a woman. It had required a certain amount of patience, but Quent Roscoe was noted for that. Some called it doggedness, but Quent preferred to think of it as patience. He didn't particularly like all the things others said about his ways of working.

QUENT bit the end off the cigar, rolling it around in his fingers while he thought about the telegram in his pocket. It was good to have a reputation and a measure of fame. It caused people to do you favors. The telegram had not been signed, but someone in Scrub Pine wanted Quent Roscoe for a friend. He might find out who it was later, and the man who had informed on Matt Childers might ask a favor in return.

Most of these things turned out to be something which could not be repaid. Quent Roscoe didn't violate his beliefs out of gratitude, and others who violated them, looked alike to him. But the telegram, despite its brevity, had helped him. It merely said that Matt Childers would be coming home within the week, and that there would be a woman with him.

Sliding over on the seat so the smoke

would float through the window, Quent put the cigar in his mouth and scraped a match with his thumbnail. His eyes touched the woman's face over the flare of the flame, and her gaze swung abruptly to meet his.

"Do you mind?" she said. "Cigar smoke makes me dizzy."

Quent blew out the match, taking the cigar from his lips. She turned her eyes back to the monotony of the land outside, and Quent studied her face. She was somewhat older than her companion, Matt Childers. Maybe thirty, Quent thought. That would make her eight years older than Childers, eight years younger than Quent Roscoe. Her eyes were hazel, and when the sunlight struck across them, there were copper flecks in them which almost matched her hair. The serenity of her even features was disturbed only by an intermittent tremor of her lips, as if she wanted to cry.

She's afraid, but something inside of her won't let her show it, Quent thought. Cigar smoke doesn't make a woman like her sick. She grew up among cowhands who chew and cuss and spit. She had to show her defiance in some way, so, she used a woman's way. She's going to keep me from smoking for ten dusty miles.

He tossed the unlighted cigar outside, and looked again at Matt Childers. The man was dragging thoughtfully on his quirly, letting the smoke drift through the other windows. Quent saw the quick shifting of Childers' eyes, and knew the man had been watching him. A sudden anger leaped through Quent: He couldn't explain it, but he knew it had something to do with the girl. Why was she with Matt Childers? A man like him didn't deserve the respect and loyalty of a woman who was both pretty and honest, while men like Quent Roscoe found it hard to make an acquaintance among her kind. She was no dancehall floozy, such as Quent had expected when he received the telegram.

"Tobacco bothers the lady," Quent said quietly. "Act like a gentleman, cowpoke."

Matt Childers' lips tightened around the quirly, and his square chin jutted determinedly as he drew in a full breath of smoke. Slowly then he took the cigaret from his mouth and crushed it under his boot.

"Through with it," he said, and again Quent Roscoe was aware of an air of defiance and challenge in the coach.

Quent thought: I ought to let him know now. I ought to tell him that I'm here for him, and never let him step out of this coach a free man when it pulls into Scrub Pine. He'd know then that Quent Roscoe never makes the same mistake twice, and always corrects those he makes.

But Quent quelled the anger the man's tone had fired in him, saying nothing. It was unlikely, because women tackled grueling trips on a stagecoach only as a necessity, but Quent could be wrong even now. The girl was his only real clue that the deep-tanned young man was Matt Childers: Quent had never seen Childers himself, but he had heard a description. He could wait until he was sure. Quent Roscoe had built a reputation on being right, and on being unshakable when he was on a man's trail. Scrub Pine would know Matt Childers.

His patience fortified by the reflection, Quent leaned back in his seat and considered taking a nap. He removed his flat-crowned black hat, tilting it over his face and closing his eyes. The image of the girl's face was as sharp in his mind as when he had been looking at her. He thought of sitting up, and straightening his hat. She would be able to see the streaks of gray which were beginning to show in his dark hair, gray which wouldn't have been there if Quent Roscoe had led an easier life.

Feeling tired, Quent stayed as he was. He thought, It doesn't matter whether she sees the gray or not. She's bound to think I'm old enough to be her father, and she already hates me because of Childers. Maybe a good rest would make me look ten years younger. They never think of that. They don't know the Quent Roscoes of this coun-

try get tired, too. They think it's only the hunted who run, and that the pursuit is tireless. But I can get some rest after this. I've done my job, served my people, and I'm tired of always trying to get to my gun first, wondering if I'll make it. I'm getting to the age now where I can't be sure any more, and I want to live like other people for awhile. I could have chucked it all three years ago if it hadn't been for him, but then I would have had to say one man got away from me. When a man's record is that good, he ought to make it perfect. I've got him now, and I'm ready to quit when it's over.

The girl's voice shook him out of his half-sleep, and Quent judged it had been less than an hour since he had closed his eyes.

"We're stopping again," she said uneasily, and Quent looked up in time to see her cut a quick glance at Matt Childers. Childers' hand flew to the gun on his leg, resting there as the coach rocked against the brake shoes.

CHAPTER TWO

Strange Conspiracy

THE driver's voice floated down from the box. "This kind of business is right good today. But I reckon I don't mind stoppin' for you, Logan. Tie your bronc 'longside that' buckskin' around back and get aboard."

"Thanks, Rufe," a drawling voice replied. "I reckon that's why I stopped you."

There was no mention of fare, and Quent knew the driver had met a friend or a man who rode by official sanction. A few minutes later, the door opened and a stocky, smiling man in a white Stetson clambered inside. Quent was not surprised to see the waning afternoon sunlight flash back from the polished sheriff's star on his calfskin vest.

The man slapped Matt Childers' shoulder companionably as he sat down between the two passengers opposite Quent, and then his smile beamed on the woman.

"Just couldn't wait, Rose," he chuckled,

taking the girl's hand in his. "I rode out as sort of a one-man welcoming party for you and . . . and Bill."

The man had paused toward the end of his remark, reading the disturbance in the girl's face and following her glance to Quent Roscoe. Quent could not be sure what the man had been about to call the girl's companion, but it wasn't Bill. He had seen the sheriff's mouth fumble for a substitution.

Releasing the girl's hand, the sheriff's eyes narrowed momentarily while he scrutinized Quent, and then his broad smile returned. He talked with the girl, dwelling on trivialities now, but his mind was on Quent Roscoe.

"Bill and I were wondering if you'd be around when we got in," Rose said. "But I might have known we could count on Logan Carter. And that's a comfort, Logan. It makes you feel good to know you stand high with the law."

She was forcing the lightness in her voice. It was too much of an act for Quent's benefit, and the redness which came into her face told Quent she realized this. Sheriff Logan Carter knew it, too, and he looked again at the other passenger, having found the answer he'd been hunting in his mind.

"You're Quent Roscoe," he said, and the exuberance he'd shown when he entered the coach was gone.

"Have we met?" Quent asked coolly. He studied the boyish face more closely. "I was thinking a man named Darby was sheriff up this way."

Logan Carter shook his head. "We didn't meet, but your picture gets in the newspapers sometimes. Darby lost the last election. He was a good man, but he stayed at it too long. He got so all he had for a heart was his badge, and folks up our way believe the law is to help people, not to hound them."

Logan Carter paused, and then added as an afterthought, "I'd have known you right off if that U. S. marshal's badge was pinned on your coat. You still working at it?"

Smiling thinly, Quent unbuttoned his box-tailed black coat and held it open to show

the tarnished star pinned to the lining over an inside pocket. At the same time, he revealed the worn black holster and silver-mounted pistol riding snugly on his left hip, hidden until now by the long coat.

"I still wear my badge," he said, and then dismissed further conversation by leaning against the seat cushions and closing his eyes again. But he left the coat unbuttoned, the sides pulled apart so his hand could flick over in his famous cross-armed draw and reach the outthrust butt of the gun.

Quent kept his eyes closed, but he did not sleep. He did not feel it was safe to discard caution, for he was at a disadvantage. Matt Childers now knew he was riding with a U. S. marshal, and, though he did not have a reputation for such things, desperation could drive a man of weak will to cold-blooded murder. For the moment Quent could not risk an arrest even if he wanted it because of the strange conspiracy which had become apparent since the sheriff's arrival.

Quent thought: I'll have to play my cards close from here on out. This Carter is tough and full of noble notions, and he's going to side with Childers because he thinks I'm persecuting him. I'll have to get them apart, and then take Childers by himself. I'll get him down to district headquarters where we can deal with him. As soon as I know he's got the term he deserves and won't be walking around where people can point him out as the man I let get away, I'll turn in this star and retire. Headquarters has been hinting for me to do this, so they must think I've earned a rest, and I'm going to take it. Maybe I've still got time to find a woman like this one Carter calls Rose, and I can still have a place to call home. But I can't figure the woman yet. Is she Childers' girl or Carter's?

THE opportunity to separate Childers and the sheriff came sooner than Quent expected, but it was not in the way he would have wished. They were two miles outside of Scrub Pine when the stagecoach veered

too sharply on a bend and knocked out two spokes of the left front wheel against a protruding boulder. The crazy wobble of the vehicle when the wheel went down tossed the passengers roughly about, and the girl in front of Quent was thrown into his lap.

For a moment, his arms were about her slender waist while he helped her keep her balance, and when the coach finally came to a sagging halt he was sorry to let her go. The touch of her had warmed Quent's blood, making him regret what lay ahead of him. The gentleness with which Quent had held her caused the girl to look closely at him, the resentment in her eyes fading briefly and then returning.

She went back to her seat, too flustered to realize it was unnecessary since they would have to get out. "I'm—I'm awfully sorry, Marshal," she murmured.

"The pleasure was all mine, ma'am," Quent said. He grinned because the remark coming from him shocked her.

Quent kicked the door open, and slid to the ground. He held up his hand to help the girl down, and her eyes probed at his as if she were begging him to let down the barrier his badge made between them so they could be friends. Her glance fell before Quent's unrelenting expression, but she let him lift her down, walking away with a cool, "Thank you."

After Matt Childers and Logan Carter stepped stiffly to the ground, they all convened around the broken wheel which the bearded driver was kicking and cursing with blind passion.

"Busted my spare on the same dad-blasted rock last week, and here I've gone and done it again," he sighed. "You'd think a man old as me, been drivin' the same run for eleven years would learn somethin' some time. I guess I'll have to leg it into Scrub Pine and haul out a spare, and Lord knows how my corns do ache when I'm afoot."

"You won't need to do that, Rufe," Logan Carter ventured. "You forget there's horses tied on behind you. I'm sure the marshal

won't mind if we borrow his buckskin so Bill and me can ride into Scrub Pine and send a buckboard out with a wheel. Mrs. Draper and the marshal can keep you company while you're waiting."

A stab of regret went through Quent when he learned the woman was married, but it was not nearly as strong as the anger in him as he eyed the sheriff. "It won't work, Carter. I'll ride out with the cowpoke. The lady will likely enjoy your company more than mine."

He started to turn, but his fury over the sheriff's plotting had left him off guard, and he had put his back toward Matt Childers. Quent felt the pressure of Childers' gun against his spine, and then the man reached around and plucked the silver-mounted pistol from the marshal's holster.

"We'll do like Logan says, Roscoe. But I'm not running from you. I've just got to get home. That's where you'll find me. But don't think you've got an easy job on your hands. Three months ago, maybe, you could have crooked your finger and whistled and I'd have give up, but not now."

Childers stuffed Quent's gun into the waistband of his levis, and backed toward the horses. Quent kept his eyes on Logan Carter's face. He said, "He doesn't have your gun, Sheriff."

Carter met Quent's challenge blandly. "I ain't in this, Marshal," he said, and the stagedriver turned and walked away to show his sentiments were the same.

It was a stand-off which Quent could not match, and for a moment he stood with his hands clenched into fists at his side, his hard eyes forcing the sheriff's gaze to turn away. He wanted to tell Carter what he thought of a man, sworn to uphold the law, who would protect a known criminal. But talk wouldn't change anything, and he fought down his anger.

Presently he looked around and found Rose Draper staring at him. She had her hands folded together in front of her as if she were afraid they might move the wrong

way if she freed them, and worry pinched her soft lips.

"If you'd let me take your horse, I'd see he left your gun at the livery stable with it," she said. The strain of riding many miles with the fear of pursuit always upon her had exhausted her, and the girl wanted to put this behind her as quickly as possible now.

"I'd appreciate it," Quent said, wanting to do her a favor. "The buckskin is real gentle, ma'am."

She nodded gratefully, and walked quickly toward the rear of the coach where Matt Childers was climbing into the saddle of Logan Carter's gelding. Quent relaxed, leaning against the side of the coach and lighting a cigar. Childers and Rose Draper rode away without a backward glance, and Quent watched them thoughtfully until they became vague outlines in the purple gloom which twilight had thrown across the prairie. He was aware of Logan Carter moving up beside him, but he did not stir until the man spoke.

"That Bill's got a mite of temper," Carter said hopefully. "Wonder why he would think you're after him?"

"Maybe it's because him name is Matt Childers, Sheriff, and not Bill somebody-or-other."

Logan Carter sighed wearily. "All right, so you didn't swallow any of that. Why don't you get off Matt's back, Roscoe?"

Quent Roscoe faced Carter with genuine surprise on his face. "I sent a deputy after him one time when I should have come myself, Sheriff. Childers beat up the deputy and got away. He's my responsibility. It's something which has to be cleared up."

"You know why Matt's here, Roscoe?"

"I don't care," Quent said.

"Well, I'm going to tell you, anyway. I sent for him. His ma's bad sick. Maybe she's going to die. I've known where Matt was a long time. He wrote me, asking me to tell his ma he was all right and working cattle on the Pecos. Every man has to have

at least one friend, and I happen to be Matt's. We went to school together."

"You also happen to be a lawman."

CARTER waved his arm impatiently. "I don't have any power outside this county, but if he had written a letter to his ma somebody would have seen it before she did and guessed it was from him. But they wouldn't suspect any of my mail was from him, and that's why he handled it that way. Matt doesn't trust people any more. He would have thought a letter from me was a forgery even, a trick to get him home. Somebody had to talk with him face to face. I gave Rose Draper the money, and sent her after him. She's his cousin, and he believed her when she told him how bad his ma is."

Quent dusted ashes from his cigar. "You can't beat the law, Carter. Somebody sent me word, too."

Logan Carter nodded. "Yeah, I gussed that. Somebody saw Rose buy a ticket, and put two and two together. They also knew nothing could keep Matt away when he found out his ma is sick. He ain't bad, Roscoe. He's unlucky. Who tipped you off?"

"I don't know." Quent watched Carter's face, saw that the man didn't believe him, but he didn't care. He added deliberately, "But it was somebody who ought to be wearing your badge."

Anger reddened Carter's face, but his voice was purring, soft. "You're wrong, mister. You can beat the law when a man starts using it for his own ends. What's your charge against Matt, Roscoe?"

"Unlawful flight and attempted murder. That's for beating up a deputy marshal. He'll do a ten-to-twenty for it. And I'll get him, Sheriff. I wouldn't advise you to meddle in it any more."

Carter grimaced, turning his back on Quent Roscoe. "I hate a man who lets other people use him, and that'll be all I can do against you. You've got too much behind you for me to fight. But I can tell you this for me—if you expect my help you can go

straight to hell before you get it, Marshall!"

Quent Roscoe stood at the bar of the Yellow Lantern saloon with a half-finished drink in front of him, and a puzzled expression on his face. After the repaired stage got into town shortly after dark, he checked at the livery stable and found his horse and gun like Rose Draper had promised. He had left the buckskin there, paying its keep for the night, and had come to the Yellow Lantern to wash the dust out of his throat while he considered how he would go about taking Matt Childers into custody. Now that he knew the reason for Childers' return, he doubted the man would run again. But he was surprised to find Matt Childers at the bar, also, doing exactly what Quent was doing—dawdling with a drink.

Like the others in the place, Childers had turned and given Quent a curious glance when he entered, but afterward he'd gone back to his drink. He acted as if he'd never seen Quent Roscoe before, and Quent let the pretense go on.

He thought, Carter is young and full of a lot of new ideas about the duties of the law, but I won't give him the satisfaction of being as heartless as he thinks I am. I'll let Childers visit his ma, and tomorrow night I'll go out and pick him up as quietly as possible. Rose Draper deserves that much; she went a long ways to fetch him home. I wonder why Carter didn't send her husband.

Despite his decision to wait, Quent couldn't allow Childers to think he was getting away with anything. He moved up beside the man. The tenseness which came over Childers was a visible thing, and Quent knew the man's hand was resting on the gun on his other side.

"This ain't it, Childers," he grunted. "So don't get jumpy. I was just wondering why you'd come right back to the same spot where your troubles started. I didn't figure there was much love between you and the Yellow Lantern."

Childers sipped his whisky, anger tightening the muscles at the point of his lean

jaw. "You figured wrong, Roscoe. I've been sending the sheriff some money along, and he's been giving it to Lee Starnes on the five hundred I took off him that time. It was a crazy thing, me losing that five hundred on Lee's roulette wheel and then taking it back with a gun. But after I lost it I was sick and crazy. That five hundred was for cattle I'd sold, and it was all me'n Ma had in the world. I thought I could run it into a pile, but I lost it. Starnes don't come to work till about eight, and when he shows up I'm going to hand him the last forty dollars in person. He's agreed to drop the charge, then. We could have worked it out from the start if you hadn't bought into it, Roscoe."

"But I did," Quent said. "You've got until tomorrow night, Childers."

CHAPTER THREE

The Informer

WITHOUT giving the man a chance to answer his ultimatum, Quent set his glass down and walked away from the bar, a strange uneasiness riding him. Matt Childers wasn't the kind to beg for favors, but he'd laid out his cards for Quent Roscoe to consider. Childers had been free only three days after he held a gun on Lee Starnes, the saloonman, and took back his gambling losses. But before old Sheriff Darby had arrested him, a Wells Fargo coach had been waylaid by a lone bandit, and among the loot taken was a treasury shipment of currency to the Scrub Pine bank. It was something Quent Roscoe had to investigate, and, because of circumstances, Matt Childers had been a suspect.

A few questions might have cleared up the situation, but Quent never got a chance to ask them. He had just come in from another tiring trail, and had sent a deputy after Matt Childers when he should have come himself. Matt had tricked the deputy into freeing his hands for a smoke; and then he'd beaten the man within an inch of his

life and run away. Quent Roscoe had arrested the stagecoach robber a few weeks later, but he'd been unable to find Matt Childers until today. Quent had made a mistake three years ago by not attending to the matter personally, but Matt Childers would not escape again.

As Quent started to leave, the batwing doors of the saloon pushed inward, and he had to step aside to avoid collision with the big rawboned man who strode inside. The man saw Quent, grinned for no apparent reason, and said in a booming voice: "Well, I hear we've got a bad roulette player back to try his luck!"

Quent forgot about going outside. He leaned against the wall, watching dourly as the big man swaggered toward the bar. The hum of conversation in the place died, leaving the newcomer's coarse laugh alone in silence. The man was asking for trouble. Matt Childers did not turn immediately, but his shoulders stiffened, and he was still as a stone.

"Ain't nothing like a sick mammy to scare a wolf cub out of its hole," the big man crowed, looking over the crowd to see how he was impressing them.

Matt Childers whirled to face the man then. His lips were tight against his teeth, and his brown face had faded to a light pink.

"Cut it out," he said sharply. "I made a mistake, Trotter."

Trotter laughed again. He wiped a hairy hand across his black mustache, and said, "Move over before I step on you, boy."

The man wanted a fight. Quent Roscoe gritted his teeth, thinking Trotter ought to have what he was asking for. A man could state his opinions in a more private place than a crowded saloon; he could use something more fitting than a sick mother as a wedge for a fight.

Trotter reached out to shove Matt Childers away from the bar, but the younger man wasn't there. As Trotter moved, Childers ducked, weaving aside. Then he stepped suddenly forward, his fist slashing at the big

man's sharp chin. Trotter staggered under the impact, scrambling backward, and Matt Childers followed him. He hit the man hard in the belly, one fist smacking close behind the other. As Trotter doubled over in pain, Childers grabbed a chair and smashed him on down to the floor with it.

Matt Childers stepped back to the bar, staring numbly down at the splintered chair still in his hands. He dropped it, wiping his hands along the seams of his pants, somewhat surprised that the fight was over, still shaken by the fury which had turned him wild. He watched casually while a man poured a pitcher of water over Trotter's face, and helped the groggy, bleeding man to his feet. Trotter stared at Matt Childers a long time, finally shaking off the hands which were helping him and heading for the door on unsteady feet.

Quent Roscoe followed him outside. Trotter stepped down into the alkali of the street, holding to the hitching rail and gulping big gusts of air into his lungs. Quent stepped down beside him.

"That was pretty rough," he said. "But I guess Matt Childers won't have many more fights here. I'm Quent Roscoe."

The man straightened, forcing a smile. He held out his hand. "Stan Trotter."

"Thanks for your telegram," Quent said. "The law can always stand some help."

Trotter nodded, still gasping for breath. "Glad to do it, Marshal. And I'll be any kind of witness you need to put that young hellion where he belongs. But say . . . how did you know I tipped—"

"Been watching for you," Quent interrupted. "After eighteen years at this business, signs get easy to read. There's always somebody who doesn't like somebody else."

His curiosity regarding the telegram satisfied, Quent started to walk away, but Trotter's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"I reckon it's plain I don't like him, Marshal." Trotter's voice was grim. "I think this range is better off without him, and that's why I let you know he was coming

back. I'd like to see him put away before that streak of meanness in him turns him into a killer. His old man died when Childers was a button, and since then him and his ma have been settin' out there on that little two-bit piece of valley graze and thumbin' their nose at the world. I predicted Matt would grow up wild, and sure enough he did. How long do you think he'll get, Roscoe?"

FOR a moment, Quent considered turning his back on the man without replying. He was grateful for help, but he didn't like to be pressed by outsiders. Trotter had done his part, and the rest was none of his affair.

"I just arrest them," Quent said at last. "I don't sentence them. Maybe he won't get a day. We have to prove something first."

Trotter's black eyes narrowed. "I thought you was tough, Roscoe. If you was tough enough you'd go in there after Childers now while he's in a mood to go for his gun. I've heard you're fast."

Quent turned away from the man, disgusted. Over his shoulder, he said, "Your nose is still bleeding, mister. You ought to stop it before it poisons something."

Cutting across the hoof-dimpled street, Quent stopped at the little restaurant next to the Stampede Hotel to eat. But after the steak which he ordered was put before him, he found his appetite had dwindled, and he spent most of his time sipping coffee.

He thought: This is my last assignment, and I can take my time at it, but I shouldn't. I'm getting involved in Matt Childers' life, and a good law officer has to remain impersonal if he keeps his nerves. That's something Logan Carter will have to learn; something I already know, but I'm letting it happen.

Giving a curt nod to the mumbled greetings of the two other patrons, Quent paid his check and went outside to catch some of the breeze which had come with darkness. He lighted a cigar, flipping the match into the street and watching idly as it burned

itself out in the dust. He did not see the woman standing in the shadows of the hotel awning until she took a step forward and spoke to him.

"I was waiting for you," Rose Draper said.

Quent touched his hatbrim, somewhat surprised that his hand was shaking. The woman's eyes held his glance for a long time, and again he saw that searching, appealing look he had noticed in them when he helped her down from the stagecoach.

"I'm flattered," Quent said, meaning it.

A brief smile lighted her face, and then she was serious again. "I saw you go into the Yellow Lantern, and I've held my breath since. I expected you to come out with Matt. I'm glad you've changed your mind about him."

"You think a right smart of him, don't you?"

She nodded. "I always have. But, last week when I found him on the Pecos, it was the first time I'd seen him since we were kids. I came back here when I heard he was in trouble, but he'd already run away."

"Then I reckon you and your husband can still help his ma out some."

Her face hardened momentarily, and she looked at her hands. "My husband is dead. He was killed a year ago, and after that I had a sewing shop in Abilene until I heard about Matt. A United States marshal shot my husband after a saloon brawl."

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

"You shouldn't be. Only I have a right to be sorry—sorry I married him. He was a tinhorn gambler, and no good. He was pulling a hideout gun on an unhappy customer's back when it happened. The marshal only did his job."

Quent breathed easier, glad she was not bitter. "Then you'll understand when I do mine. When I leave Scrub Pine, Matt Childers is going with me."

Tipping his hat again, Quent stepped toward the hotel where he planned to get a room for the night. Rose Draper turned, matching his stride. She grabbed his arm

angrily in both hands, stopping him short.

"Don't try to make one rule stand up for everything," she cried. "Life isn't as simple as that. You're after Matt because it will help you, not because it'll help anybody else. And when you do it, you'll be stealing an old woman's livelihood and a good man's birthright. Think of that when you get to feeling proud of your record."

She freed his arm and whirled away from him, weeping quietly. Quent took another step, and then came back to stand beside her against the dark wall of the sun-bleached building.

"What did you mean about old lady Childers losing her place?"

Rose Draper turned her hands up in a futile gesture. "You ought to know two women can't make money out of a ranch, even if they've got the best year-round water in the valley to back them up. Amanda Childers is so deep in debt she'll never be out unless Quent stays here to round up some cattle, and guarantee some loans. The minute he goes to jail, the Rocking T will buy up Aunt Amanda's notes, and before he gets out, Stanley Trotter will own the place. His spread joins ours, and he's had his eye on that water since Matt's father died."

Quent Roscoe sighed deeply then, knowing he had overstayed his time in Scrub Pine. The situation added up to the ugly picture he had anticipated since he had watched Stan Trotter pick a fight with Matt Childers, and then learned Trotter was the man who sent the telegram which had brought Quent Roscoe here.

"It's rotten, but there's nothing I can do about it. I've got a job to do." He had spoken his thoughts without meaning to, and, as Rose Draper's lips curled in disdain, Quent blushed for the first time in many years. He wished he had met this woman when he could have impressed her favorably, and he was ashamed of what she thought him to be.

"It's easy to see why you're still a bachelor, Quent Roscoe," she declared. "You could

never love anybody as much as you love yourself!"

Her voice was soft, tinged with anger, and her hands were clasped in front of her. It was a gesture Quent had spotted on the stagecoach as one of fear and despair. She was trying to hold back the tears which had brought dancing lights into her eyes, and her lips trembled from the effort. Quent was struck by the beauty and hopelessness of her, and yet he was angered by her condemnation of him.

Momentarily, he felt helpless under her accusing glance, and then suddenly he gathered her into his arms. Her head lifted in surprise, and Quent forced a kiss on her lips. He crushed her against him as she tried to struggle, relaxing when she seemed to cling to him briefly before pulling away.

"I could love a woman like you, Rose," he said, walking swiftly away from her. As he entered the hotel, Quent glanced over his shoulder and saw that she was still standing as he had left her, the back of one hand held lightly against her lips.

CHAPTER FOUR

Last Ride

THE MAN tried to kill Quent Roscoe shortly after midnight. The Stampede Hotel had fifteen rooms, and since Quent had put in his bid too late on a Saturday night to be choosy, he had drawn the hottest and smallest of the lot. It also was the most convenient for an unannounced visitor. But since Quent had little reason to fear trouble until he forced a showdown with Matt Childers, he had given no thought to the outside stairway which opened into the hallway just outside his room at the rear of the building's second floor.

Afterward, Quent was grateful for the heat of the place. He had lain awake in the sagging bed, staring at the fly-specked ceiling and trying to forget the thrill of Rose Draper's warm lips, until exhaustion had

forced him to sleep. But it had been a brief nap. In an hour he awoke, soaked with perspiration and his mind still in turmoil over the events which had arisen on this last assignment as a marshal. Deciding he needed a walk to cool him off and settle his thoughts, Quent rose and dressed leisurely in the dark. He had just crossed the room to get his hat from the chair next to the far wall when he heard a furtive footstep outside his door.

Ducking behind the chair, Quent watched the visitor work. A thin knife blade slid through the crack between door and frame, shoving the ramshackle night latch free of its staple. The door eased open an inch at a time until Quent could see the outline of a man's hat, and one shoulder.

Quent lifted his gun and stood up, but a board creaked under his weight, giving him away. The door was flung wide open then, and Quent only had time to see the man's arm whip back before he dived behind the chair again. He heard the knife sink into the cushioned back of the chair with a squishing sound, and then booted feet rattled hurriedly along the hallway, and down the outside stairway.

Still gripping the gun, Quent started to run after the man. His foot touched something in the doorway. He stopped long enough to pick it up. It was a man's hat, and by the time Quent reached the stairs there was enough starlight to see the initials which had been burned lightly on the inside band. M. C.—Matt Childers. But it was a brown Stetson, and when Quent had seen Childers the man was wearing a gray one. He judged Childers must have carried a spare in his warbag, for this hat showed signs of weather and sweat, a working hat.

The man was running down the alley which led behind the Yellow Lantern saloon when Quent reached the ground. He snapped off a hurried shot at the shadowy figure, and the man leaped close to the walls as a puff of dust jumped up a few feet in front of him. Quent knew the man would stay there a while, and he used the time to sprint to the

corner of the first building. He pulled up just as flame speared through the darkness twenty yards ahead of him. A bullet sang by in front of him, and Quent plunged into the dark passageway, hugging the walls also.

Firing another shot to keep the man from moving, Quent gained ten more yards in the chase. Another blossom of flame answered him, and Quent saw his quarry's defense through the flash. The man had taken refuge behind the weathered wooden cistern which stood at a corner of the Yellow Lantern saloon. It was less than fifty feet from the other end of the alley. Quent smiled thinly, realizing the advantage was all his own.

Because of Quent's nearness and the patch of lighter ground which showed beyond the saloon, the man was afraid to move. There was no other escape route for him. But Quent enjoyed a better position. He was behind the assayer's office, and the two buildings did not join. Quent started inching forward, toward the yard-wide passage which separated the two structures.

Running on the balls of his feet, Quent came out onto the street a few seconds later, and almost bumped into Sheriff Logan Carter. He had been too busy to think of the curiosity the gun shots would arouse, and he

was bewildered for a moment by the murmuring crowd along the boardwalk.

"Stay out of this," Quent said as Logan Carter grabbed at him. "Wait until you hear my next shot, and then you can come around back and see what happened."

Logan Carter tried to object, but Quent shook his arm away. A path opened for him through the crowd, and Quent ran on around the other corner. At the mouth of the alley, he threw down the hat he'd found in his doorway, and removed his own. Crouching, he peeped around the edge of the building. The man had not moved. Light glinted dully on a gun where the man knelt against the cistern.

"Come on out," Quent yelled, leaping into the open.

He got the answer he expected, but the man's hasty shot chipped at the corner of the saloon instead of swerving to Quent's new position. The man jumped to his feet, trying to get to the other side of the cistern. Quent had already set his sight. The gun rocked in his fist, and the man in the alley stumbled, falling awkwardly on his face.

Quent picked up his hat, and walked over to kneel beside the fallen man. As he turned him over on his back, Logan Carter came

PRETTY? PERHAPS!

By Bess Ritter

Imagine blackening your face with a special dye before going to a party, in order to prove that you were happy about attending! That's exactly what the Cheyenne Indians did, at tribal celebrations. And the fantastic make up went on everybody, including squaws, braves, and papooses.

When young girls wanted to look their very best on other occasions, they covered their complexions with a lurid vermilion, and hung shells in their ears. The braves dandified themselves, if they could afford it, by obtaining silver coins from itinerant white traders. The money wasn't intended for spending, however, since currency, as such, was unknown to the redskins. Instead, each metal was flattened to a thin shining round, and attached to the end of a buffalo braid. This in its turn was fastened to the hair, at the back, where it hung, gleaming and beautiful (as far as the wearer was concerned), down his back, on top of the robe that he happened to be wearing.

END OF THE MANHUNT TRAIL

charging around the corner of the saloon with half a dozen men behind him.

"It's Stan Trotter," Quent said, as Carter stopped beside him.

"Is he dead?"

QUENT shook his head, looking down stonily at Trotter's face which was pale from bullet shock. "Just in the shoulder, but I guess it knocked him out. I figured you might want to arrest him, Sheriff, if you think he's bad enough for your jail. He had some notion he wanted to kill me."

"What's Trotter got against you?"

Quent glanced at the puzzled sheriff, and his tone was one of confession. "He wanted to use me, Carter," he said. "I reckon after Matt Childers licked him tonight, he slipped over to the stage station or the livery, or wherever Childers left his warbag, and borrowed a spare hat. He meant to leave that as a clue in my hotel room. I was supposed to be dead, and Childers was supposed to end up on a hangrope or in prison for life instead of a few years for beating up a deputy marshal."

"And Trotter's Rocking T would have the best water in the valley," Carter finished grimly. "What charge do you want on him?"

"I'll think about that in the morning," Quent said. "Right now he's for you."

Quent walked on down the alley toward the hotel, feeling worn-out. He thought: That was close. If Trotter had not been too eager, I might have helped him break more law than I'm trying to enforce. Logan Carter could have told me about it, but I wouldn't have listened. This country has changed since I first pinned on a badge. Carter is good proof of that. A man doesn't have to be as good with a gun, doesn't need to be feared as much. He needs to take more time to study the scheme of things. That's the real reason headquarters has hinted to me of retirement; not because I've done so much. I understand that now, and I could be a better marshal, but some things don't change.

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

I've still got to get Matt Childers, and Rose Draper is going to hate me for it.

At sunset the next day, Quent picked up his horse at the livery stable and asked directions to the Childers ranch. He was leading the frisky buckskin outside when Rose Draper rode in on a small pinto.

The sight of her made Quent feel old and awkward. A night's rest had left her face radiant and youthful, and her wind-blown hair shimmered like copper conchos. But something else had brought the quiet contentment to her eyes, and Quent thought of the reunion which had taken place at the ranch. He said, "How's Mrs. Childers feeling?"

"Much better," Rose answered. "The doctor said if she wants to live, she will."

Quent's hand tightened on the buckskin's bridle. "Now you're going to tell me I'll kill the old lady. You came here to beg me not to do my job."

The girl remained silent, and Quent looked at her and insisted, "You did, didn't you?"

"I came to ride back with you, and to find out something about you. Logan Carter told me you made a charge against Stan Trotter this morning, and that Trotter will get a term in jail. You know why he sent for you now, and you still want Matt. Why?"

Quent studied the ground for a while, searching his own heart for the answer. When he looked back at her, his face was calm, but determined. "At the outset I guess it was for myself. I'm quitting this business, and I wanted to leave a record nobody could match. But there was another reason, too, and there still is: There's one rule among lawmen we have to make stick—never shoot a badge, never think you've cheated it. That's to keep the men who wear them alive, and that's why I still want Childers."

"Suppose I told you I liked your kiss?"

HIS pulse leaped hopefully, but Quent felt it was a useless hope and he fought to still it. "First I'd ask you about Carter."

END OF THE MANHUNT TRAIL

"He's a good friend. He's almost like a brother to Matt and me."

The silence grew heavy between them while Quent stared into space and debated the hardest decision he had ever faced. At last he said, "I ought to tell you I tore up the old warrants I had for Childers. The new one will charge him with assault. That's thirty-sixty days, maybe. But he's going to serve it. Are you still riding back with me?"

"Yes. Matt is pretty mad about the way a fool-kid holdup mushroomed on him when you took a hand in it, and he'll put up a fight if you go after him alone. But if I go in first and tell his mother how it is, he'll come out quiet and peaceful. She'll know where he is and when he'll be back. It won't be like it was before."

Quent swung into the buckskin's saddle, relieved. "You're doing me a big favor. You won't believe it, but I never killed a man in my life. I wouldn't want to start with a kid like Matt Childers. But I don't understand exactly why you're doing this."

She looked across at him and smiled. "Neither do I. Except that I guess the thing which worried me most was *why* you were after Matt. I never did think I could talk you out of doing what you thought was right. I don't think I would have liked you very much if I could. After being married to a man who's weak you don't care for them any more."

Nudging the buckskin so that it matched the pinto's stride, Quent rode away from the livery stable with Rose Draper. He fished a cigar from his pocket, and answered Rose Draper's knowing chuckle with a grin as he lighted it.

He thought: While Matt is in jail, I'm going to hire on at the Childers ranch for board and keep. By the time he gets out, I ought to have the place on its feet and have Rose convinced it's easy for me to love a woman enough to make her a mighty good husband. But she's got to learn, I smoke a cigar any time I damn' well please. * * *

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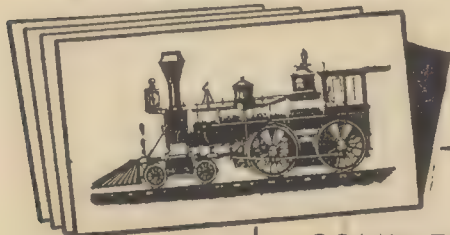
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 45)

his hand. He leveled it again with both hands and fired a second time, and he saw Lawton leave the porch and fold forward.

He crossed the yard and kicked Lawton's gun beneath the porch before he ran into the house, and Martha's name came twice from his lips before he reached her. He pulled the cloth from her mouth, and with a relief which was a physical ache in his chest he heard her say, "We are both all right, Carl."

"Thank God," he said, and tore the bonds from about her arms and legs. While she chafed life back into her cramped limbs he took the cloth from Tommy's mouth and released the boy's arms. Martha took the boy up into her arms and followed her husband as he walked into the kitchen, still pale and shaken from what he had faced in the yard.

"I thought he would kill me, Martha," Riegel said. "I still don't know how I beat him. There must be something on our side."

Her voice surprised him by its calmness. "Take a light onto the porch, Carl," she said.

Riegel took up the lamp and stepped outside to have his look across the porch to the spot where Lawton's still figure lay. Then he bent down by the top step of the porch, and he saw what had slowed the killer down, what had caught his feet and caused him to lurch and lose his balance before his first shot.

He turned back to the house, and to Tommy he said, "The bad man stumbled and broke your crutches, but I'll make you some new ones in the morning." ***

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WHILE THE HANGNOOSE WAITS

(Continued from page 88)

and looked at the man who had entered. He saw a tall fellow, dark of face, square in the shoulders and calm about the eyes. The tall man returned his glance and moved by.

"Cup of coffee, Art," McGrath said.

"Sure thing, Mac." Art hurried to pour a cup of coffee as McGrath moved down the counter and seated himself.

The slim stranger had finished his hash when Art returned. The cook laid a hand on the counter before him, lifted it, and left a five dollar bill there. The slim man started to slide his hand toward it and stopped.

"It goes with the meal," Art said casually, "but you leave a promise."

"And that is?" the slim man said.

Art grinned and looked pointedly at his bulging jacket. "That you keep that thing where it is until you've given the world another chance," he said.

"It's a deal." The slim man's hand closed over the bill, and something changed in his eyes as he looked up at Art.

"See you again," Art said.

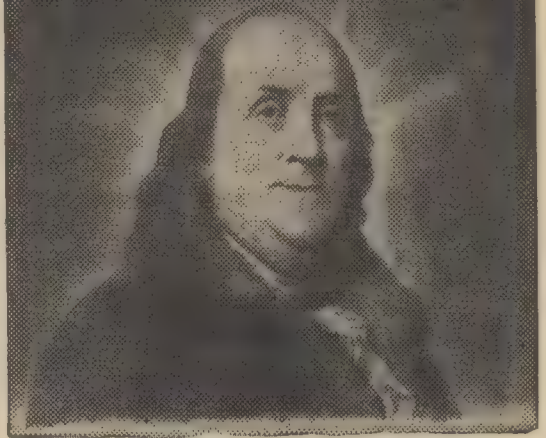
"You will." His eyes did not waver from Art's.

"Good luck." Art watched him go out onto the street and turned to look at the man named McGrath.

THE eyes of the owner of the Two Forks restaurant were filled with sympathy when they met Art's, and he said, "You want the rest of the evening off, you can have it, Art."

Art looked at him and then looked away to watch the stranger cross the street to his horse. "No thanks, Mac," he said. "I didn't watch them hang my boy, and I'll not go look at him now. The funeral will be soon enough." He watched the slim stranger mount his horse across the street, and he waved through the front window, with a prayer on his lips which he hoped the slim man could somehow hear. ❖ ❖ ❖

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(Continued from page 55)

and mud at the bottom of ponds and lakes and which volcanic heat and enormous pressure hardened and changed into slate, sandstone, limestone, graywack, conglomerate and so on.

The water-laid rocks we call sedimentaries came first; that is, ponds and lakes dried up and later volcanic action changed them into slate, or conglomerate. Then volcanic action thrust up through these areas of sedimentary rocks the molten igneous material carrying the elements which form our ores, and it piled up very high to form mountains and/or hills which were later covered by earth and trees.

Of course the earth crust had cracked and bent to let that material we call "magma" up, and also volcanic action broke and made cracks in the sedimentary slates that ran out on both sides of what was a mountain range, or maybe only one mountain. And the melted magma naturally ran into these fractures and cracks to make veins of gold ores, or tungsten veins, or copper veins, or lead veins and so on. *BUT*, as a rule, these fractures in slate or sandstone etc. do not carry pay ores for much over 1½ to 2 miles at most from the contact between the granite mountain and the sedimentary slate. They're "contact veins."

This brief explanation shows how and why ore veins are made. Also, it must occur to you that you've got to know what these rocks look like, and to recognize them at sight in the field, so that you'll not waste time prospecting in barren areas with no chance for success. Both igneous and sedimentary rocks are described fully in books, and one good one for beginners is "Field Book of Common Rocks" by Loomis, price \$4.00. Also there's "Handbook For Prospectors" by von Bernerwitz, price \$4.75. And for gemstones: "Book Of Minerals" by Hawkins, at \$1.75; also "Gems & Gem Minerals", Kraus & Slauson, price \$3.75.

It's hard to get a real idea of a rock by a description only, so it's best to have a piece of rock to check with a description. And you can get specimens boxed to mail, at dealers in minerals for a few bucks. Write 'em you want samples of chief igneous and sedimentary rocks and ask for prices. One of best is Ward's Natural Science Establishment, Inc. 3000 Ridge Rd. East, Rochester 9, N. Y.

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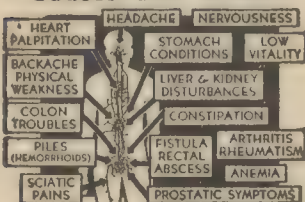
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rado mining. What I wish to know concerns the Cripple Creek Camp. I understand a new reduction mill has been built in the Cripple Creek camp. Will you please send me the information on how it is working out? Also are any of the old mines being opened up?

Any information you can give me will be appreciated.

W. R. Kelly, Duanesburg, N.Y.

Reply by Victor Shaw:

The new concentrating mill built in the Cripple Creek mining district, Teller County, Colo., is a 1,000-ton flotation and cyanide plant owned by the Golden Cycle Corporation, of Box 98, Carlton Bldg., Colo. Springs; Pres., M. E. Shoup. It is a "custom" mill, besides handling ore from the company's Portland, Cresson, and Ajax mines. The mill is named "Carlton," after the new lower 7-mile tunnel recently completed to de-water the lower workings of the Golden Cycle property, called "Carlton Tunnel." Both tunnel and mill bear the name of Mine Supt. Charles Carlton, and were dedicated on March 12th, 1951 by Lowell Thomas, who was a former resident of nearby Victor.

The Carlton Mill, largest in the USA, is situated at Elkton, midway between the "Creek" and Victor; and it's a short downhill truck haul from company major mines, thus cutting costs as well as production-time for its leasers and other nearby properties, from what they were when the old mill was down in Colorado Springs.

My reports, as of this spring, on old mines indicate that the Globe Hill Manufacturing Co. is extending its Chicago tunnel 300 feet. In charge is Harry Allen of Cripple Creek. Also, the Canyon Gold Co., Inc., Troy Wade, Pres., is shipping from its Rubie vein on the 10th level, and stoping from its 11th level and up-raising to it from the 9th level. Ore is hauled to the Carlton Mill. Leasers Wassaw and Hansen on the Cresson Cons. Gold M'g and Milling Co., are shipping highgrade from between the Cresson mine's 6th and 7th levels. Also using the Cresson shaft for a mining entry portal, lessee Trail Mines, Inc., is driving a drift on the Trail Vein, leased from United Gold Mines Co., for whom Jim Keener of Cripple Creek is consulting engineer.

This same outfit has re-opened its Vindicator mine, with Al Beebe, Jr., as president, and operations will be by leasers for the present, of which four are shipping to the Carlton Mill now.

Besides the above, custom ore is bought and milled by Carlton Mill from Brown and Denman—and Ferguson and Kumetat, who lease the Mollie Kathleen mine. Other custom

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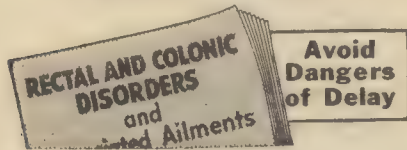


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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

shippers are John Robush from the El Paso mine—and L. W. Andres from the South Burns mine.

Maybe you sabe the local geology there; if not, Cripple Creek ore body is the great "plug" of an old crater, which fact wasn't known when Stratton opened the Independence and Portland, so the whole region was staked so a claim may looked like a dozen spider webs piled one upon another and mine lawyers made as much as the miners. But outside the central part of the "plug," the mines were too shallow to last, as there was little depth. Only those over the central plug lasted and are being worked today, and includes those named above.

Now, those over the center sank to below water table, so as far back as 1903 a drainage tunnel was dug, to save pumping costs; and as they mined below this one, the Roosevelt tunnel was finished in 1910. Finally, this Carlton Tunnel had to be driven in for 7 miles. But, as values still exist, perhaps another one deeper may be needed. Quien sabe?

The above may cover your query, but if you need more help come again.

Howdy Readers:

This is all of *The Prospector* that we had room for this time. We do hope to be able to print more of your letters in the May issue. Meanwhile, keep sending your queries to Vic Shaw at the address given on page 55. Be sure to include a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your letter.

The Editor

TODAY— INVEST IN



TOMORROW

DOCTOR'S WIFE

By
PAULINE BOOKER



♦ ♦ ♦

PRETTY, dark-eyed Jane Wilkinson was known near and far as the belle of Natchez, Mississippi. Back in the year 1815, many suitors beat a path to the door of the Calvert home, where Jane lived with relatives; but the lovely young lady remained heartfree and aloof until the day she met Dr. James Long.

Jane was about to leave the house for a walk; but just as she was tying the strings of her dainty, green silk bonnet, a maid rushed up excitedly.

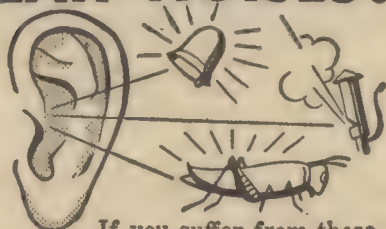
"Oh, Miss Jane, don't go out now," the girl begged. "There's a new doctor visiting the sick soldier upstairs."

"But what has that to do with me?" Jane asked.

"This doctor is the handsomest man you ever saw, Miss Jane—you must meet him."

So Jane decided to meet Dr. James Long. Though very young, the dashing, handsome doctor already had made a considerable reputation for skill and bravery. He and Jane played several games of checkers, and he promised her a pair of gloves as a prize for winning.

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

Next day, Dr. Long called again and presented the gloves to Jane. As he gave them to her, he whispered ardently: "Ah, that I might dare to ask for the little hands that will wear these!"

Jane and James were soon deeply in love; but Jane's relatives felt she was still too young to marry. However, Jane had a clever plan in mind; since she was an orphan, it became necessary for her to choose a guardian. With an impish gleam in her dark eyes, Jane pointed to her lover. "James shall be my guardian," she said.

She and James were married in May of 1815, in the rose-bowered Calvert garden. After a honeymoon on the river, they settled down in Natchez.

But in June, 1819, Dr. Long set out on an expedition to Texas. His mission was to establish colonies there and fight the rule of the Mexican government in that state. Jane Long was not well enough to go with him; but she could not long endure separation from her adored young husband. In spite of weakness, she took her two small children and set out to join him.

Traveling in a small, flimsy boat, and then on horseback through days of miserable rain, Jane became ill and had to rest for several weeks. Then, undaunted, she continued on to Nacogdoches, Texas, where her husband awaited her.

Despite frontier hardships and battles with Mexican soldiers, Jane remained steadfastly by her husband's side until 1821, when he and his men took over the garrison at Goliad. He left Jane and the children at a small fort on Galveston Bay, where she promised to wait until his return.

When winter drew on, and no word had been received from Dr. Long, the fort commander told Jane that he and his soldiers must leave.

"I promised James to wait here, and I shall remain until he sends me word, or until I learn of his death," was Jane's reply.

DOCTOR'S WIFE

The soldiers left, and Jane waited patiently throughout the long winter, her only companions being her children and a servant-girl. The little party suffered severely from the cold, damp weather; and often their only food was oysters caught from the bay. They were also in constant danger from the Indians; but whenever the redskins came near the fort, Jane would fire the cannon to make them believe the soldiers were still there.

In the spring of 1822, a messenger brought word that Dr. Long had been killed by Mexican Royalists. So Jane went back to Natchez; but she soon returned to Texas, to be near her husband's grave. And throughout the rest of her life, she carried on the works he had begun in the Texas settlements.

"A devoted wife," reads part of the epitaph on her monument; and it is a tribute richly merited. ***

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